

THE SOCIAL COSTS AND BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING  
FOR A PUBLIC AGENCY

BY

ANDREW J. KERINS

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Kim Shinew, Chair  
Associate Professor Laura Payne  
Assistant Professor Jacqueline McDowell  
Assistant Professor I. Shevon Harvey, University of Connecticut

## ABSTRACT

Researchers have highlighted the many benefits for children who participate in youth sports. However, little research has been conducted to examine the experiences of parent volunteer coaches. The lack of research on parent volunteers is particularly surprising given the increased importance of volunteers for many municipal agencies. This study explored the social costs and benefits for volunteer coaches at a municipal park district. The study was conducted with the support of the Urbana (IL) Park District. A total of 14 volunteer youth sport coaches were interviewed. Utilizing grounded theory, the data were organized into categories and subcategories through open, axial, and selective coding. The findings were organized into six main themes: the decision to coach; children first, parents second; it's not just about soccer; the most challenging aspects; program improvements needed; and core groups. Ultimately, the findings from this study led to the generation of a new theory called the theory of secondary outcomes for parent volunteers. This theory states that while most parents volunteer primarily as a way of helping their children, parents also realize secondary benefits through their volunteer involvement. The theory posits that these benefits likely play an important role in the recruitment, training, and retention of volunteers at municipal agencies.

***Keywords:*** social capital, volunteerism, youth sport, the theory of secondary outcomes for parent volunteers

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## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many public organizations are forced to operate on tight budgets. The current budget climate can be traced back to the 1970s and early 1980s when municipal governments across the United States faced reduced public funding due to significant decreases in tax revenue (Backman, Wicks & Silverberg, 1997). Prior to this period many public agencies enjoyed adequate funding to meet the growing needs of their citizens, but the tax reforms forced a new age of austerity. Despite the decrease in public funding many municipal parks and recreation agencies were still expected to meet the significant, and often growing, demand for services by their constituents. As a result, a popular motto in many public agencies became “Doing more with less” and indeed that motto still rings true today. Municipal agencies have had to develop creative new approaches for offering and carrying out the services demanded by the general public. One approach that has become widely popular in the parks and recreation field is the increased reliance on volunteers in program and service delivery.

Volunteerism is a much discussed facet of community life in America. Broadly speaking, a person engages in volunteer behavior because it helps others as well as makes the volunteer feel good about him/her (Cnann, Handy & Wadsworth, 1996). In many cases, people are interested in volunteering for an organization or cause that holds a personal appeal. For example, in a seminal article in the parks and recreation literature Caldwell and Andereck (1994) examined the motivations of people who volunteered at the North Carolina Zoo. The volunteers paid a small annual fee and contributed service hours as part of a voluntary association that assisted the government-run zoo in carrying out its daily programs and services. The researchers

reported that a strong draw for many of these volunteers was the chance to contribute to an operation that they personally cared about (Caldwell & Andereck).

Researcher have cited a number of different motivations to volunteers. In addition to volunteering for a cause one cares about (Caldwell & Andereck, 1994), people also volunteer as a way to improve their skills or enhance their knowledge of a subject (Kay & Bradbury, 2009) as well as a path to developing specific job skills (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Another reason many people choose to volunteer is because their efforts will benefit someone they know. For instance, many parents choose to volunteer as a coach or administrator for their child's sport team (Cuskelly, 2008). Without such involvement many public sports leagues would not be able to operate. Thus, parent volunteers provide a crucial service that facilitates the overall operation of a youth sport league while also being personally involved with one's child on the field or court. Similarly, some people initially volunteer when their children are in the program but then stay involved even after their children are grown. These committed volunteers likely feel a strong attachment to their youth sports program and enjoy the opportunity to continue to interact with young children. Some individuals may not have a child in the program but nevertheless volunteer because they feel passionate about the specific sport they coach. Therefore, although the focus of this study will be on parent volunteers, non-parent volunteers will also be interviewed as part of the overall effort to better understand the volunteer experience.

### **Key Concepts**

The decision to volunteer in youth sports is a difficult choice for many people. Although the costs to volunteer differ from person to person, generally speaking these costs can be understood in terms of three related factors. First, time is often cited as a significant cost people

consider when deciding to volunteer or continue volunteering (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Cuskelly, 2008; Kim, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010). Hectic schedules divided between home, work, and social commitments make volunteering a difficult choice for many people. Second, money is an important cost that many people consider when deciding to volunteer (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Cuskelly, 2008). Time and money considerations are closely related, but money is distinct in that time spent volunteering might represent time that could have been devoted to making money. Third, a significant cost to volunteering in youth sport is the additional responsibility and expectations (Cuskelly, 2004, 2008). This cost is closely related to time commitments, but includes more of the social and psychological burden associated with volunteering. In the youth sport context this could include things like the added stress of preparing practice routines as well as managing potentially difficult interactions with players, parents, other coaches, referees, and league administrators. For instance, some parents may take a more aggressive approach to the game which can make it difficult as a coach to supervise their child on your team. The resulting interactions with the parents may extend beyond the playing field, and thus an additional cost of volunteering includes the added stress of responsibility.

Despite all of these costs many people still choose to volunteer in youth sports settings (Cuskelly, 2008). This decision is, in part, due to the aforementioned volunteer interest in helping someone they know. In the context of parent volunteers, they simply enjoy being involved with their child on the sport field or court. Furthermore, some parents may also enjoy the opportunity to not only help or coach their own child but also to work with other children on the team (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009). Thus, parent volunteers contribute in a number of different ways, including assisting in the operation of the youth sport leagues as well as involving themselves in the lives of a group of children. However, parents themselves may also

receive benefits as a result of their volunteer involvement. These benefits could include personal friendships, professional relationships (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009), small monetary remuneration (Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996), opportunity to coach one's child (Cuskelly, 2008), opportunity to coach other children (Dorsch, Smith & McDonough), knowledge of government operations (Silverberg, Marshall, & Ellis, 2001), and many others. Therefore, the benefits to parent volunteers can be significant and should not be overlooked.

Potential benefits for parent volunteers include social benefits. Although the social benefits for youth are well-documented in the youth sport literature, not as much attention has been paid to the potential social connections for parents. Social benefits for parent volunteers can take many different forms. Some parent volunteers may build relationships with fellow parents that do not extend much beyond a casual nature. For instance, some parents may casually socialize with fellow parents each week on the sidelines of the field or court. Other parent volunteers may build social relationships that help facilitate coaching or league operation activities. For example, some parents and coaches may volunteer for several seasons or years to the point that they are integral to the overall organization of the league. Still others may build social relationships in which the parents and their families gather or meet outside the youth sport setting (e.g. family dinners, child play dates, birthday parties). Regardless of the type of social benefits that are manifested, it is my belief that the overall social benefits can be an effective volunteer recruitment tool for municipal parks and recreation personnel.

One way of describing the social benefits for parent volunteers in youth sport is in terms of social capital. Social capital can be understood as individual connections and the resulting social networks that can give rise to cooperation and coordinated action (Putnam, 1993, 2000). Social capital has been studied in a number of different arenas, including community gardens

(Glover, 2004; Glover, Shinew & Parry, 2005), sport and national identity (Jarvie, 2003), and community sport organizations (Sharpe, 2006). The concept of social capital is relevant in this study because the focus is on individual connections developed amongst parent volunteers. These volunteers come from a captive audience (i.e. parents) who almost all have something specific in common (i.e. children in the program). Thus, there is an incentive for parents to volunteer because their efforts will directly benefit their children. Furthermore, cooperation amongst parents can lead to coordinated action that will benefit the overall operation of the league. Therefore, volunteerism amongst parents has the potential to improve the operation of the youth sport league as well as to develop social ties and connections that can lead to social capital.

### **Study Setting**

Urbana (IL) Park District is one municipal agency that utilizes volunteers to help carry out its services and programs. In particular, the youth sport programs at Urbana Park District (UPD) heavily rely on volunteers to serve as coaches, coordinators, and team administrators. When insufficient numbers of parents volunteer to coach the two UPD Athletic Coordinators must scramble to find other individuals in the community to serve these important volunteer roles (Greg Cales, personal communication, 2010). UPD is located in a university community and thus the Athletic Coordinators often turn to college-aged students who have sport-specific experience to fill the void of volunteer coaches. This process of volunteer recruitment can be frustrating for the Coordinators because they wish more parents from the large pool of potential parent volunteers would step forward. However, they recognize that many people in their program lead busy lives that entail balancing work and the schedules of multiple children. Thus,



one of the goals for youth sports at UPD is to find the best way to recruit and retain parent volunteers that can help the agency conduct its programs.

### **Purpose and Research Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the volunteer experience for youth sport coaches at a public agency. The project will focus on parents and others who volunteer for the youth soccer program at Urbana Park District (UPD). There are two objectives for this study: (1) exploring the nature and extent of the relationships volunteers build with children, parents, and other coaches in the program, (2) discussing the positive and negative social impacts associated with working with children, parents, coaches, and league administrators at Urbana Park District. Pursuing these objectives should help yield insight on the social costs and benefits of volunteering for a public agency that will inform both academic literature as well as volunteer management efforts at UPD.

### **Study Contribution and Application**

The insights gained from this study will help inform future research on volunteers for public agencies as well as improve the volunteer recruitment and retention efforts by the athletics staff at Urbana Park District (UPD). As previously mentioned, the parks and recreation literature is lacking when it comes to research on volunteers, especially parent volunteers. This dearth in volunteering research in the parks and recreation is particularly surprising given that the current economic condition has only increased agencies' reliance on volunteers. Therefore, this study will contribute to the parks and recreation literature by exploring the experiences of volunteers at a municipal parks and recreation agency. The lessons learned from this study should help inform

future research on volunteers in youth sport. Just as important, this research will add further insight into volunteer management strategies. Slim budgets make the utilization of volunteers a necessity. This research should provide further insight into the social costs and benefits of volunteering that likely play a crucial role in volunteer recruitment and retention efforts.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the following pages I will discuss the relevant literature to my research on parent volunteers in a youth sport setting. First, a brief history of youth sport in America will be given to better understand the origins of the contemporary youth sport setting. Then, the literature on volunteerism will be reviewed in a broad context, especially as it relates to parks and recreation. Next, a more targeted review of parent volunteers will be explored. Lastly, the definitions and applications of social capital research will be discussed to help shed light on the positive and negative social elements of parent volunteerism.

#### **History of Youth Sport in America**

The evolution of youth sports has been a complex process in American history. For the most part, youth sport can be characterized as having gradually taken on a greater, more formalized role in American society (Cross, 1990). In the mid-to late-1800s the notion of youth leisure time was in its infancy. Prior to that period, the leisure time of youth and adults was mixed with work time in a largely agrarian-based society (Kelly, 2012). However, due to the Industrial Revolution and increased urbanization many youth were put to work at an early age in places like factories and mills. The notion of youth leisure time began as a response to the oftentimes harsh working conditions for the young laborers (McLean & Hurd, 2012). As a result of these conditions, many upper-class women began to advocate for youth leisure time that would help improve the moral character of working-class youth (Cross).

The Rational Recreation movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was born out of this concern for the moral character of working-class people, including youth. The Rational Recreation movement represented attempts to maintain social order and control while also providing opportunities for improvement, especially among young men (Bailey, 1978; Cross, 1990). These efforts also extended to the plight of youth. Many factory and business owners had no objection to employing youth labor, but a significant portion of upper-class women felt this practice was reprehensible (Cross; Kelly, 2012). For many working-class people child labor was seen as a necessary part of life, but many upper-class people felt the harsh working conditions for youth would not improve unless someone intervened (Cross; Kelly). Thus, the goal for these upper-class women was to decrease and ultimately eliminate child labor in order to provide youth the opportunity to develop strong moral characters (Cross, Kelly).

Whereas the Rational Recreation movement had an over-arching concern for working-class people, including youth, the Playground Movement was specifically geared towards the leisure time of youth. The Playground Movement originated in the 1880s and 1890s in Boston, New York, and Chicago (Cross, 1990). Prior to this period the leisure time of youth was largely spent playing in city streets. Therefore, the major focus of these playgrounds was to provide children with safe, supervised areas that helped them escape the rigors of urban life (McLean & Hurd, 2012). Early versions of these playgrounds were little more than unused city lots with sand, but later more complex play structures were built to provide further opportunities for play (McLean & Hurd).

The design of parks and playgrounds was a key factor in the evolution of youth sport. The Rational Recreation movement led to the design and construction of many new parks around the country, including notable sites such as Central Park in New York. Frederick Law Olmsted,

the designer of Central Park, as well as many of his contemporary park designers were interested in constructing parks that helped people improve themselves (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992; Spirn, 1996). In response to rapid industrialization, these park designers sought to create park spaces that resembled pastoral settings in which people could engage in passive recreation activities in order to relax and restore themselves emotionally (Rosenzweig & Blackmar; Spirn). However, a significant flaw of such park designs was that they did not include space for active recreation. Olmstead and other designers did not consider spaces for ball fields as valuable and necessary inclusions in their designs (Spirn). Only later were such additions or alterations made to parks across the country to include more active recreation spaces.

The struggle between passive and active recreation spaces was significant as it related to youth sport. Olmstead and other figures in positions of power often sought to define the debate along lines of space for social and moral improvement. Such thinking was enmeshed in issues of power because it frequently entailed upper-class people deciding what was best for working-class people. Although such spaces were designed with intentions for passive use, they were increasingly being used for active recreation (Spirn, 1996). This mixed-use led to frustration for many park designers and other experts, but over time it was understood that active recreation uses played a key role in the design and utilization of public park space (Cross, 1990; Spirn, 1996).

Elements of active recreation also became integral parts of the programming and core educational message delivered at recreation facilities. For instance, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) was originally founded in 1844 in London as a means for moral reform among young men (Cross, 1990; McLean & Hurd, 2012). In the 1850s the idea and principles of the YMCA were adapted to the United States, but by the 1870s the YMCA had evolved from a

moral improvement center for boys and young men to one focused primarily on physical activity and team sports (Cross, 1990; Kelly 2012). The emphasis on physical exercise and team play for boys was in large part an effort to cultivate heterosexual norms that reflected dominant American values such as manliness and competitiveness (what Cross, 1990, and others have called “muscular Christianity,” p. 144). The values of manliness and competitiveness pointed to a larger cultural adherence to the system of capitalism. Furthermore, Cross (1990) noted that the adoption of sport at American colleges and universities was widely promoted as a means of fostering the necessary skills to succeed in the business world (it was not until Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that federal legislation began addressing the inequalities in sport between young women and men).

Another key development in the evolution of youth sport was the suburbanization of large parts of the United States. Beginning in the 1920s with the car culture and continuing on into the 1950s, massive housing developments were built to house the growing U.S. population. It was recognized that playgrounds and ballfields were also important elements to be included in these new developments (Cross, 1990; Kelly, 2012). These spaces provided places for young children, almost exclusively boys, to play traditional sports like baseball, basketball, and football. Over the succeeding decades youth sport became a more formalized process as many parents sought to enroll their children in more structured leagues and organizations. Many public parks and recreation agencies were formally instituted during this time to help meet the organizational and logistical needs of managing park spaces as well as the leagues and games that took place in these spaces. However, in the 1970s and 1980s these government agencies were dealt a significant cutback as tax reforms swept the country and resulted in far fewer dollars for the operation and maintenance of public parks (Backman, Wicks, & Silverberg, 1997).

The increased urgency of utilizing volunteer assistance in program and service delivery is largely tied to budgets. Many public park and recreation agencies have experienced dwindling budgets while simultaneously experiencing a growing demand for services (Backman, Wicks, & Silverberg, 1997). Backman et al. explained that in the 1970s and 1980s there were political and policy changes which resulted in significantly less tax revenue available to public parks and recreation agencies. This crunch on budgets and services left many parks and recreation agencies scrambling to meet the growing demands of their constituents. This trend towards less tax revenue continues today for many municipal entities in the U.S. As a result, many parks and recreation agencies across the country (and, for the matter, around the world) are addressing the heightened demand for their services through the creative deployment of volunteers.

### **Volunteerism**

Parks and recreation services frequently benefit from volunteerism. Such volunteering behavior may take many different shapes and forms. For example, researchers have pointed to the importance of volunteers in everyday service provision (Silverberg, Marshall, & Ellis, 2001). Community-level voluntary associations are also popular (Putnam, 2000; Stebbins, 2000). Other volunteers may join state- or regional-level parks and recreation associations in order to contribute, including at sites such as zoos and museums (Caldwell & Andereck, 1994). Regularly scheduled but infrequent sporting events also require large numbers of volunteers in order to be successfully delivered (Misener & Mason, 2006). People can also join voluntary organizations in terms of a “check book membership” in which their active involvement is minimal, but they choose to support the organization financially (Putnam, 2000). There are many different avenues for volunteer involvement in the parks and recreation field. Kim, Zhang

and Connaughton (2010) highlighted the importance of understanding the various reasons people get involved at different levels and types of volunteer settings (motivations to volunteer will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent section).

In the parks and recreation literature volunteering is defined in several different ways. Cnaan et al. (1996) summarized various volunteering definitions and came up with four main dimensions of the concept: free choice, remuneration, structure, and intended beneficiaries. Free choice refers to the fact that engagement in the activity is not coerced or obligated but rather a conscious decision by the individual. Remuneration refers to some kind of financial reward for the volunteer involvement. This dimension includes a broad range of financial rewards, from no pay to low pay or a stipend. The structural dimension of volunteering describes whether the activity is formal or informal. Formal volunteering might include something like getting involved in a city-sponsored special event whereas informal volunteering could be helping to pick up trash in one's neighborhood. The last dimension, intended beneficiaries, entails who will benefit as a result of the volunteering. The beneficiaries of volunteering could be strangers, close friends or relatives, or maybe just oneself. The last dimension of intended beneficiaries is particularly salient in the context of my study because I believe that many parents initially get involved as a way to help their children, but in the end these parents themselves also receive significant benefits.

Stebbins (2004) built upon these four dimensions in his discussion of volunteering as leisure (and leisure as volunteering). He said, "volunteering is uncoerced help offered either formally or informally with no or, at most, token pay done for the benefit of both other people and the volunteer" (p. 5). Although Stebbins was interested in volunteering in a fairly specific context, his definition is nevertheless useful because he brings together the four dimensions



discussed by Cnann et al. (1996). Regardless of the specific definition, volunteering is largely acknowledged as a vital component in parks and recreation service delivery.

### **Engaging Citizens to Volunteer**

Public park and recreation officials attempt to match volunteers with tasks and roles that best fit the particular volunteer's interests. Oftentimes volunteers are attracted to particular spheres of interest (e.g. youth, environmental education, sports) that lend themselves to specific activities. Building on this interest, agencies must then outline specific tasks or roles for their volunteers. For instance, in the example of youth soccer it would be helpful to outline several basic tasks or assignments for parents to fill, including things like helping as an on-field assistant, serving as a communications assistant to coordinate emails, assisting with gear storage and transportation, and providing snacks and drinks. This approach of outlining specific tasks or roles has proved to be an effective strategy for recruiting and retaining volunteers (Cuskelly, 2004). Such strategies can be particularly important for parents with multiple jobs and/or multiple children who are interested in contributing, but need a clearly defined role that will not be overly burdensome. Volunteer recruitment and retention has become a vital component of many public park and recreation agencies because these regular, loyal volunteers are essentially an extension of the agency (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Cuskelly, et al., 2006). Of course, some researchers pointed out that it is important to be sure these initiative-taking volunteers are truly aligned with the agency's mission to ensure they are not acting in a manner that the agency would disapprove (Barnes & Sharpe). Fostering regular, loyal volunteers must begin with matching tasks and roles to the volunteer's interests in order to build a sustaining relationship for the long-term.

In some cases volunteers may be especially proactive and seek to define their own roles within the agency or organization. Barnes and Sharpe (2009) described these highly engaged citizens as “project champions” because they take the lead on a specific project and, with minimal agency assistance, recruit other citizens to help accomplish their project. These project champions can become crucial members of an agency or organization’s operation because their ability and willingness to act autonomously results in greater service provision for the agency. In their study of a unique and intriguing case study of Dufferin Grove Park (DGP) in Toronto, Canada, Barnes and Sharpe noted that one highly engaged volunteer, Helen, was described as a “community supervisor” because over the years her consistent involvement in the park meant that she was a well-respected figure that many people turned to for guidance and leadership, including staff members. In fact, Helen had been involved in the hiring process of new full-time park staff. As the researchers noted, it was important to Helen and other volunteers that any new park staff would be able to embrace the volunteer framework at DGP.

Other researchers, in discussing volunteers who have regularly assisted in a program for a number of years, described the importance of such volunteers because they fill crucial leadership positions (Cuskelly, 2008). Without these individuals many municipal parks and recreation programs would fail to operate. For instance, people who volunteer to coach (lead) provide an extremely important function in the community. If there were no volunteer coaches then many youth sports leagues would fold due to lack of coaching and leadership. Indeed, long-time volunteers tend to offer unique skills and knowledge of the agency’s system and culture in order to successfully navigate hurdles to provide quality programs. For instance, Sharpe (2006) described a youth baseball league in which players and coaches in the oldest division had competed against one another for many seasons. Through their long-time involvement in the

organization and the relationships built up with one another, the coaches were able to work together one year to rebalance the teams after several games showed the teams to be badly mismatched. In addition to the leadership components of this example it also illustrated the importance of the trusting relationships that are built over time in such volunteer settings. Furthermore, these relationships are what help give rise to the social ties and connections that can lead to social capital.

Research on volunteerism in the parks and recreation field has also been conceptualized in terms of coproduction. Coproduction refers to the joint efforts of an organization and interested individuals in providing a service (Backman, Wicks & Silverberg, 1997; Silverberg, 2001; Silverberg, Marshall, Ellis, 2001). Silverberg and his associates have done a fair amount of work describing the concept of coproduction and its relevance to municipal parks and recreation. Their work has mostly focused on the motivations of coproducing volunteers. Specifically, they examined the primarily self-serving reasons people engage with an organization or entity in order to offer parks and recreation services.

Although I do not fully agree with their characterization of coproducing volunteers as primarily self-serving, Silverberg and colleagues (2001) developed an interesting scale to measure coproduction. The three main factors in their scale were described as: The Department Needs Me, Benefit to People I Know, and Knowledge of Government Operations (Silverberg et al., 2001). The Department Needs Me factor related to “the perception that the program for which people volunteer would not continue if they were not volunteering” (p. 84). This factor entails a contribution to a community good or civic responsibility (similar to solidary motivations for volunteering that will be discussed later). The second factor, Benefit to People I Know, is the direct outcome or reward as a result of the volunteering. This factor is very similar

to Cnann et al.'s (1996) intended beneficiary dimension in their definition of volunteering. Silverberg et al. (2001) framed their factor in more self-serving terms, but nonetheless this factor points to the strangers, friends, relatives, and/or oneself that benefit from volunteering. The third factor, Knowledge of Government Operations, can be related to my specific project because it involves people who might be interested in the operation of youth sport programs. These individuals can be helpful volunteers as well as useful sources of input or feedback to help improve the overall program.

### **Leadership Roles and Professionalization**

The opportunity to take a leadership role in a voluntary capacity can be an excellent way of developing new knowledge, skills, and abilities. Researchers have pointed to the importance of such leadership roles in helping people develop new skills, including developing skills transferrable from leisure to civic settings (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Glover & Hemingway, 2005). Leadership skills such as planning an event, organizing people, and preparing a budget may be useful in other civic arenas. Furthermore, such skills can also potentially transfer into the professional arena to help better equip people to do their job or perhaps even provide them with the skills needed to acquire a new job. In an example from a developing country, volunteering has been seen as a real opportunity for developing job skills and abilities *as well as* professional contacts that may assist in the future acquisition of a position (Burnett, 2006). In this example from a poor, rural area of South Africa the authors noted that youth sport was instituted as a means of improving life for both children and the adult volunteers. The coaches and league administrators reported that the experience, including volunteer training, benefitted them in terms of status, training, and mentoring experience (Burnett, p. 288). Nevertheless, Glover and

Hemingway (2005) fairly pointed out that the types of skills and knowledge gained as a result of such volunteering highly depends on the tasks completed and the specific setting in which the volunteering takes place.

There is also a more challenging and difficult side of leadership roles in volunteering. Researchers across the board have acknowledged and described the contemporary challenge individuals and organizations face with the professionalization of sport, especially youth sport (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Cuskelly, 2008; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Nichols & Shepherd, 2006). In other words, youth sport organizations are not being run the same way they were run 50 years ago because these organizations are adopting more modern business practices. The private sector has had a significant influence on volunteer management to the extent that youth and voluntary sports are increasingly being run like businesses that require specific business-like skills (Barnes & Sharpe; Cuskelly, et al.). This formalization can be helpful in some ways because it likely leads to increased efficiency and a more formal, structured way of operating. For example, more professionalized youth sports leagues have a method for electing new board members, making specific assignments for each board member, and distributing regular electronic communication between board members. In comparison to more informal setups, these standardized, business-like processes help ensure the league operates more smoothly.

The professionalization of sport may have many positive aspects to it, but this formalization also comes with costs. In their study of rugby club administrators in Australia, Cuskelly and colleagues (2006) discussed the displeasure some people expressed with this increased professionalization. These researchers noted that such shifts have occurred on a broad scale even though organizations often do not have “the resources to fully embrace business strategy development and practices in their operation” (a summary of Auld, 1997, as seen in

Cuskelly, et al., p. 143). In other words, some leagues might look to adopt a more business-like approach even if they do not have adequate volunteers, volunteers with specific skills, or the time and financial resources to follow through on such an approach. In their work, Cuskelly and colleagues found that some people were not interested in volunteering with an organization that had become increasingly business-like. Reasons for this lack of interest included volunteer efforts that seemed too much like work or, similarly, a highly formalized volunteer commitment that required excessive amounts of time and energy.

The professionalization of sport can also lead to some potential volunteers feeling excluded from important and meaningful leadership roles. For example, Cuskelly (2008) found that increased formalization was intimidating for those community members who perceived they lacked the skill and confidence to adequately lead in the sporting organization. He stated “Community members who are less educated and not in the labor force do not have the networking benefit of being employed and may believe that they do not have the skills or confidence to volunteer for a [community sport organization]” (Cuskelly, p. 194). Thus, rather than providing an opportunity for people to develop new skills and abilities, in this instance the individuals felt they could not even undertake the role because they were not qualified. Glover, Shinew, and Parry (2005) discussed a similar version of exclusivity in their study of community gardeners. They reported that many African-American residents in a neighborhood felt excluded by White residents from the process of control and decision-making related to their local community gardening. In yet another study, Sharpe (2006) found that some individuals were excluded or felt pushed out as volunteers because, despite their long tenure as a volunteer with the organization, they did not possess enough business-like skills in order to successfully navigate the contemporary volunteer leadership terrain. In this case the overall league suffered

because the time demands on the volunteer board members became so great that they could not keep up with the many necessary tasks. Therefore, the professionalization and increased business-like approach of many youth sport organizations has the potential to intimidate many people who might otherwise be interested in volunteering.

### **Motivations to Volunteer**

Public park and recreation agencies are increasingly exploring the motivations behind people's volunteerism. It is important to understand *why* people are interested in volunteering and not just the specific kinds of volunteering activities that they would like to engage. The study of volunteer motivations has been an expansive one in the park and recreation literature, especially because it has shown that understanding volunteer motivations is a fruitful endeavor for recruiting and retaining volunteers (Cuskelly, 2004; Cuskelly et al., 2006). One way of understanding volunteer motivations is in terms of incentives. In the parks and recreation literature, Caldwell and Andereck (1994) wrote a paper on people's motivations for getting involved in a recreation-based voluntary association (in their case it was the North Carolina Zoological Society). They adopted the conceptual approach formulated by Knoke and Prenskey (1984) to discuss three main categories of incentives: purposive, solidary, and material. Purposive incentives refer to the social interactions and interpersonal relationships that result from volunteerism. For instance, people who are recently retired may enjoy volunteering as a means of interacting with people outside the home. Solidary incentives entail contributing to the common good or fulfilling a civic responsibility. For example, picking up trash in one's neighborhood might be a solidary incentive because it keeps the area clean not just for oneself but also to the benefit of other citizens as well. Lastly, material incentives refer to tangible

rewards that oftentimes can be translated into monetary value. A material incentive for volunteering at a botanical garden may include a small stipend or perhaps a cutting off a prized plant that could be taken home and reproduced. The purposive, solidary, and material dimensions are useful for understanding the incentives people have to volunteer.

In their summary of the volunteer motivation literature, Caldwell and Andereck (1994) identify purposive and solidary incentives as the two main reasons people decide to volunteer. Others have echoed these sentiments, particularly in regards to purposive or social aspects of volunteering. Bauman (2001) argued that people are motivated to engage in civic participation precisely for social reasons because many citizens are increasingly feeling physically isolated. Kim, Zhang, and Connaughton (2010) suggested in their conclusions that an important aspect of maintaining or sustaining volunteer motivations is to create some kind of volunteer social networks that helps people keep in touch with their fellow volunteers. In the context of youth sport such gatherings may be geared towards the children, but nevertheless the adults can still greatly benefit from the renewed social contact and opportunities for sociability.

It is my belief that such social benefits for parent volunteers are potentially numerous, but there is little research in the parks and recreation literature that focuses on these kinds of benefits. In fact, the parks and recreation literature has had relatively few recent additions when it comes to studies of volunteering in North America. Perhaps this is due to the continued focus on youth sports as all about the children. Focusing more on the benefits for the parents in youth sports, particularly with the many critiques that parental involvement in youth sport already receive (see Messner, 2009, and Farrey, 2008), may be seen as a slippery slope that neither practitioners nor academics wish to go down. However, I do not believe this has to be an either/or argument in which youth sports are either all about the children or all about the parents.



My interest is in highlighting the benefits parents receive *while* volunteering to improve their sons' and daughters' youth sport league. One should not go without the other, with the understanding that the best interests of the children should always come first. One approach is to reframe parental involvement in youth sport in order to highlight ways adults can help that will be both fun and meaningful.

Many parents may not start out volunteering in their child's sport or activity as a way of having fun and developing social networks. Indeed, enrolling one's child in a sport or activity is likely a mostly simple act of finding an interesting outlet for the child. But research has shown that these social networks are important benefits of youth sport volunteering that become valuable ties in their own right. For instance, one study discussed the importance of parent peers and the resulting opportunities to socialize as a key ingredient for improving the quality of parent's experiences in youth sport (Dorsch et al., 2009). Participants in this study noted that getting to know other "sport families" was a significant aspect of their child's youth sport participation. Families with children around the same age got to know one another quite well as their children grew up playing the same sport(s). These opportunities for ongoing, repeated social interaction contribute to potential social connections with fellow parent peers as well as with other children on the team.

The interest in volunteering to aid and assist in youth sport is frequently tied to having a child on the team. Although this is not always the case, most people who volunteer in youth sport do so because their son or daughter is involved on the team or has been in the past (Messner, 2009). The motivation to help out when one's child is involved in an activity seems fairly obvious. However, researchers have also noted the increased frequency with which parents cite their enjoyment with helping not only their own child, but also other children on the

team (Dorsch et al., 2009). In other words, many parents initially get involved to directly help their child, but through their involvement they have a fulfilling experience by helping and socializing with other children on the team. This added benefit to parent volunteering appears to be a significant one that could be potentially useful to youth sport leagues in their attempts to solicit and retain parent volunteers.

### **Costs and Challenges to Volunteer Recruitment, Training, and Retention**

Despite the numerous benefits for parent volunteers in youth sport there are significant challenges to volunteering. Three major obstacles to getting parents involved pertain to lack of time, inability to make a long-term commitment, and the financial cost of volunteering (Hall et al., 2006, as seen in Barnes & Sharpe, 2009). Parents with young children, especially those with multiple young children, may already be balancing multiple activities with their children to go along with their own professional and social lives. It remains to be seen whether people who choose to volunteer are even interested in expanding their social networks beyond their current boundaries. The inability to make a long-term commitment is similar to the first challenge in that parents may already be stretched thin when it comes to time, energy, and resources. Adding another commitment on top of existing ones could simply be too much. Lastly, there is a financial cost of volunteering. Barnes and Sharpe did an excellent job of discussing the importance of volunteering while also acknowledging the financial hardship that such involvement entails. In their study, several highly active volunteers were paid small stipends that helped offset the difference of what these people could make if they worked. These individuals noted that although the stipends were small they still went a long way towards making them feel appreciated *and* encouraging them to continue to be an active volunteer rather than look for work

Many parents still choose to get involved despite all the challenges listed above. Cuskelly (2008) reported that the 35-54 year-old age cohort is the group most likely to be involved in youth sport volunteering (p. 193). This is not surprising, Cuskelly explained, because this age group is the one most likely to have children who are of the age to play youth sports. In addition, the 35-54 year old- age cohort is also the group most likely looking to extend their own involvement in a sport (beyond participation) to a level that includes volunteering (p. 193). That is, these former players are looking to extend their participation in the sport through alternative outlets (what Cuskelly, 2004, calls the “transition-extension hypothesis,” which will be discussed in more detail later). Nichols and Shepherd (2006) discussed the importance of identity to former sport participants, noting that those players no longer able to physically participate often look for ways to maintain their involvement in some fashion or another (i.e. volunteering). Such efforts to extend sport participation may be true for many parents who participated in a particular sport as a youth and young adult and now wish to see their child(ren) participate in the same sport or activity.

Despite the fact that some parents have previous involvement in a sport or activity, it is often important for parents and coaches to undergo volunteer training. Researchers have routinely recognized the importance of good coaches in creating a positive environment for children in youth sport (Ferreira & Armstrong, 2002). Furthermore, these same researchers identified the need for good training for coaches to ensure they promoted the values and principles of their specific league. Volunteer training is a crucial aspect of youth sport because it helps outline positive youth development principles (Smoll, Smith, Barnett & Everett, 2003; Vella, Oades, & Crow, 2011; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Focusing on positive youth development principles helps align parent volunteers and coaches under a common set of goals

that reinforce the agency's mission. In turn, focusing on an agency's mission is important in municipal parks and recreation settings because these agencies often emphasize effort, cooperation, and inclusivity over competition and winning. Thus, creating an inclusive youth sport environment requires careful and deliberate training that helps set the tone and expectations desired by the agency. Ultimately, these volunteer training efforts highlight the fact that the mindset and approach to working with children in youth sport is just as important as the actual lessons and techniques that are covered on the field.

There are many different agencies and organizations in the United States that deal with volunteer training for youth sport. Three of the most prominent organizations related to my study are the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO), the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS), and the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA). The AYSO utilizes several core philosophies in their approach to youth soccer, including an emphasis on positive coaching and player development (American Youth Soccer Organization [AYSO], 2011). These principles are stressed at all levels of the volunteer soccer organization, from league administrators down to coaches, parents, and players (AYSO). The NAYS emphasizes a training program for league administrators and coaches as well as parents to ensure they all play a positive role in the child's development (National Alliance for Youth Sports [NAYS], 2011). Interestingly, the NAYS was formerly known as the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA) but changed its name in 1993 to reflect the broader importance of training not just for coaches but administrators and parents too (NAYS). The PCA was founded in 1998 at Stanford University and its focus is on training coaches to become a "Double-Goal Coach"; this approach entails focusing on winning as well as teaching life lessons through sport involvement (Positive Coaching Alliance [PCA], 2011). The PCA incorporates parents into the mix by having them stress the positive life

lessons that their child(ren) can gain from sport activities (PCA). All of these organizations recognize the importance of training not just coaches, but also league administrators and parents in order to set expectations and help ensure the emphasis is on positive youth development principles.

Lastly, volunteer retention is also a significant challenge in the youth sport arena. As previously discussed, time, commitment, and money are often significant limitations when it comes to volunteering. Other researchers have pointed to lack of time, lack of interest, and ill health as the three main barriers to volunteering (Sundeen, Raskoff, Garcia, 2007). Regardless of the types of barriers that prevent people from getting involved as volunteers, these factors also can influence whether or not people maintain their volunteering. On the surface level volunteer retention may seem like a relatively easy concept to grasp. However, researchers have highlighted the increasingly complex web of factors that are considered when it comes to volunteer retention. One group of researchers focused on the importance of volunteer's motivations when it came to recruiting, placing, and retaining volunteers (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992). Another, more recent study problematized the common view that volunteer retention primarily hinged on a volunteer's personal motivations and dispositions (Rundle-Thiele & Auld, 2009). Instead, these researchers pointed to the importance of the organizational setting in which volunteers devoted their time as a significant factor in the volunteer retention equation. A slightly different study focused on the "fits" and experiences for a volunteer, including person-task fit, person-organization fit, and management treatment (Kim, Chelladurai, & Trail, 2007). The findings from this study showed that all three experiences were important when it comes to the volunteer's intention to continue volunteering for the organization. Therefore, the focus on volunteer retention has evolved over the years to include not just the volunteer's personal

motivations but also the person's fit with specific tasks as well as the organizational setting and treatment by the organization's staff.

Volunteer retention may also depend on people's experience or involvement in the particular sport or activity. For instance, Cuskelly (2004) described a "transition-extension hypothesis" in which former participants in a sport get involved as volunteers with their respective sport club as a means of staying involved. Transitioning to the role of a volunteer allowed many of the individuals in Cuskelly's study to extend their involvement in the sport beyond their actual playing days. Cuskelly's work primarily focuses on community sport organizations (CSOs) in Australia, Great Britain, and Australia, but the principles from this study would also apply to the many public parks and recreation leagues in the United States. For instance, people who have a soccer background as well as children in a public soccer league are a great source of potential volunteers. Indeed, in the present study there is a large pool of potential parent volunteers, at least some of whom have soccer-specific experience. However, it is still important to focus on the best ways to make the parent volunteer experience enjoyable so that these parents will continue to volunteer for the program. Thus, recruiting parents with a soccer-specific background to be volunteer coaches appears to be a smart strategy; but the emphasis must also be on retaining good volunteer coaches by finding the right fit with the organization. In the next section I go into more detail on parent volunteers in youth sport.

## **Parent Volunteers**

### **The Role of Parent Volunteers in Youth Sport**

Involving parents as volunteers in youth sport is becoming increasingly important in order to operate and maintain quality recreation programs. In their article on the topic of

parental involvement in youth sport, Green and Chalip (1997) built on other researchers' work to outline the three components of youth sport that are most significant to parents: info dissemination (Morrison, 1993), assignment to specific roles (Bauer & Green, 1994), and facilitation of social networking (McPherson, Popielarz, & Drobnic, 1992). First, info dissemination refers to providing relevant material to youth sport parents so they can stay up to date on rules, schedules, schedule changes, etc. This particular component has undergone drastic changes with the widespread use of technology. For instance, rules and schedules that used to only be available as a paper copy can now be accessed electronically; furthermore, schedule changes due to inclement weather can now be sent via email and posted online to ensure rapid communication. The importance of information dissemination has only increased with busier schedules and advances in technology.

Second, assignment to specific roles means having concrete tasks or jobs for parents to fulfill as part of their involvement (Green & Chalip, 1997). Outlining a list of specific roles helps reduce duplication of duties and it sets clear parameters on the expectations for each role. Specific tasks also allow people the opportunity to sign up for something they are comfortable with and it gives parents a way to consistently contribute over the course of a season. Such reliable completion of tasks is often vital to program operations, particularly with the greater emphasis being placed on volunteers in the parks and recreation field. However, assigning parents to specific roles should not entail simply finding busy work in order to keep people involved. Researchers in the volunteer literature have found that such strategies often backfire because volunteers have a negative experience when assigned meaningless tasks and therefore are less inclined to volunteer in the future (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009). Although this component

will likely entail additional up-front work for parks and recreation practitioners, the long-term payoff will likely be well worth the effort.

Green and Chalip's (1997) third and last component, facilitation of social networking, is particularly important in the context of my study. Green and Chalip provided the three above-mentioned components as suggestions for future research and therefore do not lay out specifics on each component. However, I interpret the third component, facilitation of social networking, as a direct indication of the importance of the social aspects to parent volunteers in youth sport (Kim et al, 2010 highlight the importance of these social aspects in their call for the development of volunteer social networks). As previously mentioned, youth sport has potentially significant positive outcomes for parents who get involved. However, there is not yet a significant body of literature in the parks and recreation field relating to the topic. It is my hope that my study will shed light on these social ties and connections that can lead to social capital.

In addition to the benefits to parents for volunteering in youth sport, there are also positive and negative consequences for the youth themselves depending on which policies are adopted and the approaches used in youth sport organizations. On the one hand, parents in youth sport can play a potentially devastating role if sport organizations are increasingly run to maximize competition and results (i.e. winning) without recognizing the critical messages that go along with such approaches. For example, if winning is prized above all other results then using performance enhancing drugs or other forms of cheating can slide into the realm of acceptability. In other words, the end justifies the means. In addition, a heavy emphasis on winning (by parents) can also lead to violence (by parents). Examples of parent violence in youth sport settings are too frequent in the news because they highlight the excessive investment that parents



make in their child's success at youth sport. Violence between parents at a youth sporting event is unacceptable for many reasons, not least of which is that it models poor behavior for young children. These examples of poor parent behavior in youth sport can have unfortunate consequences. Just like the positive lessons learned on the field can transfer to everyday life, so too can the negative lessons. These kinds of lessons are not what most parents have in mind when they sign their child(ren) up for youth sports.

On the other hand, parental involvement in youth sport can also serve a positive role. Many parents who volunteer do so in a coaching capacity and thus have the potential to positively influence many different children. Researchers have routinely recognized the importance of good coaches in creating a positive environment for children in youth sport (Ferreira & Armstrong, 2002). Furthermore, these same researchers identified the need for good training for coaches to ensure they promoted the values and principles of their specific league. On a slightly different note, researchers have also described the need to develop appropriate spectator expectations in the youth sport setting. As previously mentioned, Dorsch et al., (2009) discussed this idea in terms of teaching parents and spectators appropriate bleacher behavior (Sharpe, 2003, 2006, discussed a similar concept). I think the bleacher behavior concept is excellent and should be formalized in more leagues, especially those that are experiencing problems with unruly and ill-behaved parents and spectators.

However, enforcement of the appropriate bleacher behavior rules may be difficult, especially for umpires and referees who already do not hold an esteemed place in many youth sport settings. I served as an umpire and referee in both youth and adult sports (a job which I came to detest), and I would be hard-pressed to advocate for referees and umpires to be the ones to police such settings. These individuals are already under a lot of stress and adding additional

duties outside the boundaries of the playing field could potentially result in even fewer people willing to officiate. However, some kind of change needs to be made. In more drastic cases, I am familiar with outright bans on parents attending youth sporting events. The games are played in front of no audience with just the children, coaches, and officials on hand. In other situations it has become common for parents and fans to have to sign a contract in order to be able to sit in the spectator area. Similar to what was discussed earlier, terms of such conduct include fairly standard items about an emphasis on positive youth development, but they also tend to include clauses about unruly fan behavior potentially affecting the outcome on the field. For example, teams will be punished for unruly fans. Such strict measures may be necessary in order to help restore order at sites where the social pressure to perform (pressures felt by children *and* parents) has become immense. To be fair, the increased attention on performance and competitiveness likely reflects a larger national trend in this direction. It has been argued that youth sport has steadily moved in this direction for decades and we are now increasingly seeing the results of these national trends (Farrey, 2008; Hyman, 2009; Messner, 2009). Despite the broad occurrence of such trends, it is important to begin addressing these issues in some fashion at the local level.

### **Parent Socialization and the Downsides of Parental Involvement in Youth Sport**

The process of parent socialization to youth sport is an emerging topic in the literature. Socialization in this sense refers to the way in which parents learn the written and unwritten rules, social patterns, and norms of their child's specific youth sport league. This process of assimilation is also something that children experience, but in this study I will focus on the major aspects of parent socialization. First, the sporting organization itself can have an enormous

influence on parents (Green & Chalip, 1997). Green and Chalip acknowledged the significance of youth sporting organizations to parents, including the ways the youth sporting organization would indirectly influence the children. For instance, if a league changed its schedule several times during the season many parents would likely become frustrated with the inconsistency because it would affect their own plans and schedules. Sharpe (2003) described the influence of a youth sport organization that was poorly run, saying that even in a league which was premised on “Fair and Fun Play” the poor management of the league led to many unhappy parents. On the other hand, Barnes and Sharpe (2009) reported in a separate article on an extremely well-run parks department in which volunteers did the majority of the work for planning and executing programs and events. Such proactive volunteer work had been fostered in the parks department for more than ten years and, as a result, had helped nurture a culture in which local citizens expected programs and events to be well-run.

Second, parent socialization into the youth sport culture is largely influenced by individual as well as collective attitudes and behaviors. In many ways, this point relates to the first one in terms of the importance of the youth sporting organization helping to set the tone for parents. However, this attitudinal tone-setting is not always the case. Holt et al. (2008) reported that many parents perceived their knowledge of the specific sport being played was greater than that of other parent peers. The result of these perceived differences was tension amongst parents and spectators in the stands. Those who believed they knew more about the sport felt some other parents were making uninformed critiques of the referees, strategies, or other parts of the game. Put a different way, parents and fans who were perceived to possess less sport-specific knowledge (such observations were made by parents as well as the researchers through

participant observation) contributed to an awkward and uncomfortable bleacher environment for some parents.

In the same study mentioned above but on a different note, Holt et al. (2008) highlighted the influence parent behavior in the bleachers had both in terms of the parents of children on the same team as well as parents from opposing teams. Such influences could include both positive behaviors (e.g. cheering for a player on the other team for good hustle) and negative behaviors (e.g. yelling at the umpire for what was perceived to be a bad call). Proactively addressing such negative behavior by parents and fans in the stands has become a key issue for many youth sport leagues. Dorsch, et al. (2009) described an informal system of parents learning appropriate “bleacher behavior” from fellow parents as well as their children (p. 455, 458). Learning appropriate bleacher behavior was largely a social process by which more seasoned parents and families modeled behavior in the stands. However, this process can also be influenced by the children. In one example, Holt et al. described a child who yelled back at his Mom during the game for her to settle down and be less critical of him. Such examples are poignant because they involve not just a lesson on appropriate bleacher behavior but also a public shaming in front of fellow parent peers. This public shaming was no doubt embarrassing and potentially isolating, but it was also an instance where inappropriate behavior was at least momentarily corrected.

In a more formal sense, youth sport leagues are adopting policies and posting signs that specifically outline the ways in which parents should and should not behave in the stands. Holt et al. (2008) discussed signs in the spectator area of their study site that said “Teams are responsible for the behavior of their supporters” (p. 672). The implication here and in other such examples is that irresponsible or inappropriately behaved spectators can potentially hurt their team through penalties or even forfeit. In an example closer to home, the Champaign (IL)

Park District has similar signs posted on ballfields located at the south end of Centennial Park next to Prairie Farms. The sign title reads “Champaign Western Little League Coaches Promise” and underneath is a bulleted list of items describing the commitment to positive youth development principles (i.e. not just winning). Interestingly, the last point on this list reads, “The game is for the kids, *not the adults*” (emphasis in original). The inclusion of this item points to the increasing role that parents can (sometimes negatively) play in youth sport and the efforts being made by municipal parks and recreation agencies to proactively address such concerns.

In another example of formal policies for parents, Sharpe (2006) discussed a league in which the umpires were charged with maintaining order and fair play on the field as well as in the stands. Unfortunately, in the case study that Sharpe described the umpires for the youngest age group were the most inexperienced and did the poorest job of policing spectator behavior. This lack of appropriate enforcement led to many complaints about the “disorderliness” on the field and in the stands at these games (p. 394). In comparison, the older age groups had the most seasoned umpires and they experienced very little inappropriate bleacher behavior. The researcher described the more controlled situation at the older age level as a result of the children, coaches, parents, and umpires having grown up playing together in this same league. Getting to know other youth and parents over several seasons and/or years is an important process that speaks to the significance of youth sport leagues having a system in place to help socialize parents into the rules, social patterns, and norms at the early stages and ages of their league involvement

The third influential factor pertaining to parent socialization into youth sport is culture. While the sporting organization has certain influences and parent attitudes and behaviors have still other influences, there are broader cultural factors that affect the ways in which parents

approach the process of assimilation into youth sport settings. For instance, Messner (2009) described four significant cultural influences or changes in the last 40 years that have led to the growth of organized youth sport in America: 1) organized efforts to get children more physically active; 2) a culture of fear in which many parents want their children in organized activities in order to avoid perceived unsafe societal conditions; 3) changes in family structure, especially in the middle class and with more women in the workforce; and 4) growth in girls' and women's sports. The increased attention to organized sports and concerns over safety has led to distinct changes in the ways children *and* parents approach youth sport. Messner pointed to a potentially unpleasant path in which adults believe their actions are fostering positive outcomes for children but ultimately may be doing just the opposite. Unchecked parental enthusiasm for involvement in youth sport can lead to a narrow focus on winning that may in fact limit the child's development. It is hard to argue against the underlying ideas or motivations for the above four influences or changes, especially for such positive things like increased opportunities for girl's and women's sports. However, these cultural changes in many ways can still align, or be co-opted to align, with parental goals that oftentimes singularly focus on winning at the expense of positive youth development.

Farrey (2008) discussed some similar issues with American culture when it comes to parent's obsession with youth sports. He explained that the increasing quest for dominance in youth sport is largely due to a system set up by adults and reinforced by parents (the title of Messner's 2009 book, It's All About the Kids, is an ironic nod to this setup). According to Farrey, this adult system is one in which sporting organizations and the young athletes themselves are becoming increasingly part of a professionalized operation that focuses on short-term results rather than long-term growth and development of the individual athletes. In

comparison, Farrey provided the European youth sport model as an alternative approach. In the European model youth sports are largely funded by professional teams and clubs, but the focus on development does not truly begin until children hit age 13. Even with their interest in developing potential future stars for the highest level, the clubs still recognize the importance of all around individual development (e.g. social and psychological as well as physical) in addition to developing a solid base of athletic skills and habits. Farrey explained that he does not see an easy path by which American amateur sports would switch to such a setup, but he does highlight the need for significant changes in attitudes and expectations to better socialize children and parents, but especially parents, into American youth sport organizations.

### **Hidden Costs of Youth Sport**

As previously discussed, parents oftentimes make significant investments of time, money, and energy into their child's youth sport pursuits. Once a family is involved in youth sport it can be a difficult decision to leave a specific team or even leave the sport all together. In other words, there are hidden costs for leaving a specific sporting organization and/or leaving the sport altogether. Ferreira and Armstrong (2002) build on the work of others to discuss the switching costs (Dick & Basu, 1994) and sunk costs (Schmidt & Stein, 1991) of changing or ceasing participation in youth sport. Switching costs refer to the costs of switching from one sport organization or agency to another. These costs would include things like initiation fees, new uniforms and equipment (Ferreira & Armstrong). Reasons for switching participation from one organization or agency to another may include desire for increased competition, desire for decreased competition, a family shift or move, costs, logistical difficulties for parents, and others. Ferreira and Armstrong explained that switching costs also include psychological costs

such as the difficulty of leaving a valued and respected coach as well as losing the bonds and friendships developed with fellow players.

Sunk costs, on the other hand, are the “investments that are lost when participation in an activity or organization ceases (Ferreira & Armstrong, 2002, p. 156). In other words, sunk costs are experienced when a child quits playing the sport or activity altogether. Reasons for ceasing participation may include burnout or lack of interest, injury, lack of connection to other players, costs, logistical difficulties for parents, and others. Burnout in particular may be a particularly salient point because, as Farrey (2008) notes, children in America are pushed at a younger and younger age to be competitive in sports. This encouragement from parents can often begin as well-meaning enthusiasm but can morph into a heightened competitive edge that focuses on winning and, ideally, securing a college athletic scholarship. As I will discuss later, the early emphasis on winning and, in particular, winning at all costs can be a detrimental influence on youth sport.

Researchers have also begun to describe the switching costs and sunk costs that parents experience when a child leaves a specific team or leaves a sport altogether. In one study, researchers described the significance of the loss of parent peers when a child chose to leave a sport (Dorsch et al., 2009). These parent peers, developed through regular social interaction over several seasons or several years, had become an integral part of the youth sport experience. Similar to what is discussed in the social capital literature, these regular social interactions provide opportunities to build bonds and cement ties to other parents and children. These bonds and ties can be difficult to lose, particularly when a group has been together for many seasons or years. For instance, the Urbana Park District (UPD) Youth Soccer league recently experienced a situation in which parents and players of a middle-school-aged boys’ team decided to split away



from the UPD league in order to form their own traveling soccer team. Greg Cales, the UPD Athletics Coordinator, discussed this situation as one highly motivated by the parents in order to keep the close-knit group of players and parents together (Personal Communication, 2010). This example shows the influence that parents exert on youth sport not just for their child(ren) but also for themselves. Letting go of such long-term social connections can be difficult. Indeed, Dorsch et al., (2009) described in their study how, “On the back end of a child’s sport career, or as a result of a child’s sport transition, parents noted difficulty in accepting the loss of these [adult] social networks” (p. 457). The costs of leaving or transitioning in youth sport can be difficult to bear, especially for the parents. In the next section I discuss the concept of social capital that is often associated with such adult or parent social networks.

### **Social Capital**

There have been three main approaches to social capital research as espoused by several different authors: Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam. Each scholar describes people’s social relationships, connections, and networks, and the benefits therein, but they all approach social capital differently.

#### **Pierre Bourdieu**

Bourdieu was one of the first scholars to expound upon the concept of social capital. He defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). Bourdieu asserted that individuals acquired benefits, or resources, as a result of their participation in groups. These resources were

not directly economic in nature but rather social and cultural resources. Ultimately, Bourdieu believed the development of social networks and the resulting access to social and cultural resources afforded individuals certain advantages (what he would call power) that they could and did use for their direct benefit.

Bourdieu discussed the ways in which social and cultural capital afforded individuals advantages in society (1985). For comparison, cultural capital can be defined as the privileged knowledge and recognition that come from arenas such as upbringing, social class, and family connections that afford individuals distinct personal and professional advantages (Bourdieu, 1985). For instance, an individual from a highly college-educated family has a distinct advantage when he/she begins college because the knowledge and expectations of the college environment are lessons implicitly learned from an early age. A person from a non-college-educated family could acquire such knowledge upon arriving at school, but this knowledge and understanding would take considerable time and effort to acquire. Ultimately, Bourdieu believed one's social networks, and the resulting social and cultural capital, would grant an individual access to resources with direct economic benefits. For example, coming from a well-educated, professionally-connected family could potentially mean opportunities in social and leisure clubs that could lead to lucrative business deals. Such opportunities do not necessarily guarantee access to better financial dealings, but the opportunities would be much more plentiful than if the individual were not included in the clubs. Therefore, people who have the access to cultural and social capital can best utilize or capitalize on the social connections they have developed and maintained in order to benefit economically.

According to Bourdieu, the social networks from which these (social and cultural) resources were derived needed to be actively constructed and maintained (1985). Involvement in

such networks was not accidental but in fact a conscious choice. Bourdieu believed people chose to cultivate such relationships and networks because they desired the associated cultural and social benefits. To carry forward the cultural capital example from above, it was not enough to just have access via family members to other influential people in society. These opportunities would also include efforts to interact with these fellow movers and shakers on a semi-frequent basis in order to build trust and friendships that could then lead to more distinct assistance in a business deal, political campaign, or similar situation. Making the effort to cultivate such trust and relationships may not pay immediate dividends, but the overarching goal is to acquire access to people and relationships that could potentially be beneficial down the line. In this way, Bourdieu's conception of social capital points to his inherent belief in the underlying power structures that influence individuals' actions.

The tie between social capital and power structures is crucial to Bourdieu's discussion of social capital. He discussed social capital as not an inherently good force but rather one that was frequently exploited and manipulated (1985). As mentioned above, Bourdieu believed ultimately social capital was exploited by individuals for their own personal economic gain. He saw direct ties from social capital to economic capital and believed individuals used this power consciously in order to economically benefit themselves. Bourdieu also believed social capital was used in manipulative ways, namely to preserve class and group interests (Glover & Hemingway, 2005). For example, factory owners could draw on their social networks (and the associated social capital) in order to form strong partnerships against labor union demands. By working together, factory owners could present an impenetrable front against the unions and therefore maintain their (upper) class interests. These networks would likely need to be built up over time in order to be effective, and it would be in the best interests of all the factory owners to

work together against the unions to ensure their continued profits. In this way, Bourdieu's version of social capital was power and that power was connected to money.

### **James Coleman**

Coleman also played a pivotal role in the evolution and development of the concept of social capital. Coleman defined social capital in terms of its function, saying "It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors... within the structure" (1988, p. S95). This definition reflects Coleman's unique approach to social capital which incorporated theoretical elements of both sociology and economics. In the very broadest theoretical terms, Coleman viewed social actions as neither wholly free choices made by individuals (economics) nor as actions solely influenced by one's social environment (sociology). Coleman saw room for a conceptualization of social capital that described coordinated action by individuals within a broader social structure.

Building on his unique approach, Coleman described several important factors that distinguished his work from Bourdieu's work. In particular, Coleman is famous for emphasizing the role of social capital in creating human capital (1988; 1990). Human capital can be defined as the knowledge, skills, and competencies one has acquired in order to perform a job for economic capital (Coleman, 1988; 1990; Portes, 1998). Another way of understanding human capital is in terms of the education and experience one has acquired (Coleman, 1990). In comparison to people such as Karl Marx and his broad theories on human labor or capital as the source of wealth (Marx & Engels, 1978), Coleman viewed human capital in more individualistic terms. He saw human capital not as an aggregate labor pool, but instead as the ability and

potential of individuals to perform specific jobs. This individualistic view of human capital was very personal and therefore related to social capital in terms of the ways people interacted with each other and how this might lead to facilitated action.

In one of his original works Coleman (1988) discussed three forms of social capital within social structures (as summarized by Glover and Hemingway below). First, obligations and expectations provided “incentives to invest in social relationships because investors trust that other members of the network will reciprocate” (Glover & Hemingway, 2005, p. 391). In other words, people expect that the relationships and resulting trust they develop with others will have some sort of benefit. Second, information channels allowed “individuals access to specialized or privileged information that others have obtained” (Glover & Hemingway, 2005, p. 391). This form of social capital is similar to what Bourdieu identified in terms of cultural capital. Third, social norms “encourage members to act for the group’s collective good even if the action does not directly or immediately benefit the individual member” (Glover & Hemingway, 2005, p. 391). Social norms can loosely be related to volunteering for youth sports because even if a person has a child on the team their efforts still benefit a broader group (children) than just themselves.

Coleman (1990) later added to these three original forms of social capital, coming up with a new list of six: obligations and expectations, information potential, norms and sanctions, authority relations, appropriable social organization, and intentional organizations. The first three are very similar to the original three proposed. The fourth, authority relations, referred to “transfer ‘rights of control’ from several group members to one member who may then employ the resulting extensive network access to achieve a specific goal” (Glover & Hemingway, 2005, p. 391). Thus, the authority relations form of social capital is about pooling resources, likely

intangible resources, for a common goal. Fifth, appropriable social organization was “one that was developed for one purpose but may be appropriated for another” purpose (Glover & Hemingway, 2005, p. 391). This form could include a situation where a volunteer network from a Park District pools its collective energy and contacts to raise money for international disaster relief. Sixth, intentional organizations “bring people together to create a new entity which directly benefits them and others who invest in it, but also benefits others who are less immediately involved” (Glover & Hemingway, 2005, p. 391). This last form, intentional organizations, closely aligns with my ideas on developing volunteer social networks. Municipal parks and recreation agencies should consider developing volunteer social networks because of the likely benefits to the agency as well as to the volunteers themselves.

Coleman (1990) also placed a particular emphasis on social ties between actors within the social structure. The concept of social ties is not a new one; it has been discussed by scholars such as Granovetter (1973) who described strong and weak ties. Strong ties refer to the relationships and connections one has with close friends and family, particularly people you share experiences with on a daily basis and where the connection involves meaningful sharing of information. On the other hand, weak ties refer to more casual relationships with friends (and sometimes family members) that are not necessarily regularly maintained. For instance, a person with whom you have a weak tie may be someone you socialize with once or twice a year and therefore would not be the person you could call upon to help you fix a flat tire or watch your sick kid who was home from school. Up until Granovetter, most researchers only highlighted the importance of strong ties in terms of social networks and community. However, Granovetter was unique in his thinking for pointing to the broader reach of weak ties (hence his coining of the phrase “the strength of weak ties”). Granovetter believed that an individual may have five or six

strong ties to close friends or family members but have dozens or more weak ties to co-workers, neighbors, relatives, etc. Weak ties, therefore, are a far more significant aspect of social networks because they indicate potential opportunities for interaction with a larger pool of people. Coleman (1990) saw the significance of strong and weak ties as they related to dense networks of people. He highly valued the social connections that were developed through informal family networks as well as community structures, and strong and weak ties were what contributed to these dense networks of actors (Lin, 2001, discussed similar ideas on dense networks).

### **Robert Putnam**

Putnam (1993; 1995; 2000) is the third major scholar who has contributed to the development of the social capital concept. Putnam originally defined social capital as “features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1993, p. 35). Putnam later refined his definition to, “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Hemingway (2006) and others have criticized Putnam’s earlier definition as too broad-reaching. Putnam responded to critics at the time and his latter definition represents a more measured, albeit still very powerful, approach to understanding the concept of social capital. As I will explain later, there are several cautions that should go along with Putnam’s definition of social capital, but ultimately his definition resonates most with the direction of my research.

Putnam recognized that social networks, and the resulting social capital, take many different forms. For instance, social networks exist between families, amongst groups of

neighbors, within sports groups and teams, and so on. In leisure studies in particular, these kinds of social networks are often associated with recreational activities outside the home.

Furthermore, social networks can be developed across a spectrum of opportunity, including one-time special events, annual festivals, monthly civic meetings, or weekly sports leagues. Stebbins (1992) is a prominent leisure scholar who has spent his career examining the norms and networks of the various leisure activities which people pursue (he coined the term “serious leisure” to describe these dedicated individuals). Putnam further delineated social networks and their resulting social capital in terms of their formality. Informal networks could include things like a group of neighbors who periodically get together for potlucks but who do not have a regular or set schedule for socializing. More formal networks might pertain to business or professional societies which require certain credentials, demand specific decorum, and have regular meetings that require attendance. Putnam envisioned social capital existing in many different forms.

Putnam (2000) categorized the social capital developed as a result of these different forms or opportunities in terms of bonding and bridging capital. Bonding capital refers to the connections and ties made within an existing social network. Such ties may be newly created ones or simply existing ties that are reaffirmed or strengthened through shared experience. The key aspect of bonding capital is that the capital is developed within an existing social group or boundary (Putnam frequently pointed to groups in terms of voluntary associations). Bridging capital, on the other hand, can be understood as the capital generated between individuals in separate groups of people. So for instance, a person may participate on Softball Team A and have a good rapport with most of the members of her team. However, after a particularly fun game against Softball Team B the individual makes a connection with members of that team and



therefore bridges the gap between Team A and Team B. In another way of understanding the terms, bonding capital can be understood as “intra-group cohesion” whereas bridging capital can be understood in terms of “inter-group cooperation” (Woolcock, 2001 as seen in Burnett, 2006, p.284). Putnam is well known for his emphasis on groups and thus the concepts of bonding and bridging capital help make sense of the way people operate in groups.

Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital included a heavy emphasis on voluntary associations. Similar to early scholars who described the nature of community in America (especially De Tocqueville’s Democracy in America), Putnam believed voluntary groups and associations were the core of American community engagement because they were opportunities for regular social interaction which could lead to collective action. Indeed, the title of Putnam’s seminal book, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, referred to the decline in league bowling in favor of small group or individual bowling games. This loss of regular social interaction is precisely what Putnam laments because it represents a weakening of social networks.

Putnam attributed the weakening of social networks and the resulting loss of social capital to four main factors (Blackshaw & Long, 2005; Putnam, 2000). First, Putnam explained that 10% of the decline is due to increased demands on people’s time and money. For instance, he explains that the greater involvement of women in the work force has contributed to a reduced amount of time spent organizing and planning opportunities for social interaction. Second, he described a further 10% of the loss is related to urban sprawl and suburbanization. In particular, Putnam highlighted the time lost to commuting as a result of urban sprawl. Third, Putnam attributed 25% of the loss of social capital to new forms of electronic entertainment, especially television. Fourth, Putnam attributed the remaining 50% of the decline in social capital to

generational change. This last factor, generational change, was what Putnam saw as a changing of the guard from a long civic generation to the Baby Boomers and Generation Xers. Putnam believed that subsequent generations did not engage in voluntary associations in the same way as previous generations and thus the rules and opportunities for social interaction had changed. It remains to be seen how Putnam's calculation of these social changes plays out, but regardless he provides useful insight for understanding the nature of the changes in American society.

### **Social Capital Research Within Leisure Studies**

Many researchers in the parks and recreation literature have picked up on Putnam's (1993; 1995; 2000) approach to social capital in order to better understand the concept within leisure contexts (Burnett, 2006; Cuskelly, 2008; Glover, 2004; Glover, Parry, Shinew, 2005; Ingen & Eijck, 2009; Jarvie, 2003). Indeed, the appeal of Putnam's approach to social capital lies in the fact that he highlights the contribution of leisure in terms of social and community regeneration rather than purely economic terms (Blackshaw & Long, 2005). My proposed study would build on such work to examine social capital in the context of parent volunteers in a youth sport setting. However, before further elaborating on the specific direction of my project, it is important to discuss two crucial elements of social capital research within the context of leisure studies: sense of belonging and identity.

Connecting with other individuals through a leisure activity fulfills a basic human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Leisure activities have long provided an opportunity for people with similar interests to jointly enjoy their specific sport, hobby, etc. (Stebbins, 1992). Social capital encapsulates these connections (belongingness) by highlighting the nature and extent of the social ties around a specific activity. To be clear, it is important to distinguish

between the sources (relationships) and the benefits (resources) of social capital (Burnett, 2006; Dika & Singh, 2002). In his seminal review of the origins and applications of social capital Portes (1998) stressed the importance of distinguishing between the definition of the concept and its alleged effects in order to maintain academic clarity and avoid circular reasoning. In terms of a sense of belonging, the source of the social capital is the relationships built upon mutual interests and shared experience. These mutual interests and shared experiences could include an activity like backpacking in which a group of friends take long backpacking trips each summer. These trips are opportunities to relive past backpacking experiences and continue to have new experiences. These common interests and experiences in turn lead to benefits such as a sense of belonging. Thus, in this backpacking example, the sense of belonging would be an intangible benefit resulting from social capital.

In addition to a sense of belonging, leisure researchers have also identified identity as significant factor in social capital studies. Some leisure researchers have discussed leisure's role in helping formulate individual identity (Haggard & Williams, 1992). Others, such as Jarvie (2003), have looked at broader notions of identity such as sport fandom and patriotism. In the latter sense, identity can be understood as feeling of belonging or inclusion with an amorphous group resulting from a similar cause or interest such as a favorite sport team or nationality. Similar to the notion of belonging, identity highlights the way individuals think of themselves in relation to a group or collection of people. Jarvie (2003) cautioned against expanding social capital to include identity on the national level because this may be stretching the concept beyond its theoretical limits (a concern also put forth by Portes, 1998). But it can be argued that at a more local level neighborhood and community identity potentially play an important role in social capital research because close proximity at the very least creates greater opportunities for

social interactions. This does not mean that such local contexts will produce the right conditions for social capital, but it does mean that the likelihood is greater. Indeed, one of the most interesting things Putnam (2000) discussed was the importance of voluntary associations and social networks for their ability to bring together strangers to potentially form social bonds and ties. Such opportunities, whether or not they are intentional, at least point to the significance of a common starting point such as neighborhood or community identity that can lead people to connect to others in their community.

### **Critiques of the Social Capital Concept**

It is important to understand the main critiques of the social capital concept, particularly within the leisure literature. These critiques generally fall within a couple of categories. First, social capital is held up as a cure-all for many of society's ills. Putnam's (2000) version of social capital has become the most popular in the nonacademic world as well as with many researchers, including leisure researchers, in part because of his focus on a broad scale. However, critics have pointed out the sweeping assertions that have been made in the name of social capital are based more in fantasy than in fact (Blackshaw & Long, 2005; Burnett, 2006; Glover & Hemingway, 2005; Portes, 1998, among others). For example, Jarvie (2003) discussed the relationship of sport and social capital in Scotland. He reviewed the programs undertaken by the Scottish government in the name of urban and community renewal, often under the label of fostering social capital. Jarvie (2003) reported that the influence of Scottish sport on social capital was not nearly as great as many thought, saying that "it is unrealistic to expect sport to be totally responsible for sustaining a sense of community or citizenship or even reinforce notions of social capital" (p. 152). Indeed, Jarvie noted that sport itself should be viewed as only one of

a number of options of achieving goals such as urban renewal and reduction in barriers for ethnic minorities. Based on Jarvie's article as well as a general understanding of the literature, it seems that building trust at the local level is one of the most important factors in creating positive situations for the development of social capital.

Attempts to utilize social capital to address issues at a societal level are particularly attractive to politicians and policy-makers. Blackshaw and Long (2005) described the political seductiveness of social capital because it is often viewed as an easy, clear-cut way of addressing society's social ills. Things like urban blight, ethnic and racial tension, social class tension, and juvenile delinquency are all common issues that social capital promoters wish to tackle. However, Blackshaw and Long (2005) noted that social capital initiatives designed to address these kind of problems are overly ambitious and oftentimes misguided. The researcher's main justification for these critiques is that social capital initiatives are neglectful when it comes to issues of power. These critiques are particularly true in the U.K. and Australia, where the authors base their views, because governments in these countries have been known for their advancement of sport initiatives as a means of widespread social change (Blackshaw & Long, 2005). The use of social capital initiatives to address social concerns should be undertaken with the advice and consent of local community members. Working to define and address issues at a more localized context would likely yield better results, according to Blackshaw and Long (2005). Nevertheless, even communities and their respective youth sports organizations are subject to political infighting and power issues that would make throwing more money at a problem or issue irrelevant (Blackshaw & Long, 2005). Thus, political and policy-oriented efforts to utilize social capital initiatives should be open for a critical and constructive discussion about their lofty goals and alleged benefits.

Social capital critiques have also been leveled at Putnam for his community-level claims of civiness. These critiques are in large part about the appropriate level of scale for social capital research and policy. Portes (1998) made the case that other researchers such as Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988; 1990) directed their lines of inquiry on a much more individual level. However, Portes (1998) noted that Putnam (1993; 1995) focused his research on a much broader level, including towns and cities. This shift was a marked one, Portes noted, because Putnam's thesis became not just about individuals within voluntary associations, but also voluntary associations in the collective and therefore representative of an entire town or city's sense of community or civiness. Portes believed that Putnam overstepped in such assertions, noting that the social capital concept in his view is really about individuals and should remain about individual connections and ties.

In a slightly similar vein to the critique on scale, some scholars pointed out that Putnam's sole or primary focus on volunteer associations overlooks the broader notions of civic engagement and civic participation (Glover & Hemingway, 2005; Hemingway, 2006). In other words, people do not necessarily have to be involved in voluntary associations to have social ties, connections, and networks that result in social capital. In some ways Putnam (2000) pays respect to the other forms which social capital can take (as discussed earlier), but his argument is largely based on the more formal, structured voluntary associations such as sports leagues and PTAs. However, contemporary social structures are likely different than they were 50 years ago. To use Putnam's example of the generational change that has led to changes in social networks (and thus social capital), Blackshaw and Long (2005) pointed out that perhaps voluntary associations are simply changing with newer generations. These new forms may not look like

the more traditional Rotary or Lion's Clubs, but it is likely that newer clubs are taking shape in ways that better fit contemporary needs for civic engagement.

The second main critique of the social capital concept has been the lack of attention paid to the dark or negative side of the social networks and connections that give rise to social capital. Blackshaw and Long (2005) are fairly blunt in their criticism, saying that Putnam (2000) was far too optimistic with his conception of social capital. Other researchers provided more specific points that elaborated on the dark underbelly of social networks. Glover (2004) in his study of community gardeners stated "communal forms of leisure socially connect individuals with each other to forge reciprocal relationships" (p. 144). However, he also noted that such collectives could be highly exclusive and therefore leave out people who might be interested in joining. In Glover's study the exclusivity was perceived along racial and class lines that were not initially apparent but became fairly cohesive after further investigation. A similar exclusivity critique could be made of Oldenburg's (1999) concept of "third places," which are places adults go to socialize outside of home and work. In theory places like taverns and coffee shops are open to everyone, but in practice many places are frequented by a specific set of clientele (e.g. that is where all the college children go; or, that restaurant is a gathering place for Hispanics). The rules and norms attached to such places are often subtle and unwritten, but they tend to be generally understood by local residents and therefore serve to allow some people in while keeping other people out.

Similar to the notion of exclusivity, researchers have discussed the problem of social capital when it comes to conformity and social control. In his review of the social capital literature, Portes (1998) described three basic functions of social capital, one of which is social control (the other two are social capital "as a source of family support, and social capital as a

source of benefits through extrafamilial networks,” p. 9). Portes explained that social control could be good in some instances because it helped create things like enforceable trust within a social network. For instance, tight social control in a neighborhood might mean parents watch over each other’s children while the children play outside. Should a particular child misbehave then the child may be reprimanded by the observing parents or at least the fellow parent would be informed of the indiscretion. However, such tight knit networks and neighborhoods are not always a good thing. Too much social control can mean conformity and social division at the expense of tolerance, especially in terms of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Blackshaw & Long, 2005, p. 242). These issues of power should not be overlooked.

Another element within the dark or negative side of social capital is that social capital is not equally accessible to all people within an organization or within society at large (Hemingway, 1999; Misener & Mason, 2006; Sharpe, 2006). As mentioned above, social inequalities related to things like race, gender, class, and sexual orientation likely play a pivotal role when it comes to joining a group. Furthermore, even if a person is allowed to join a certain select group that does not necessarily guarantee him/her equal access to the people and associated resources within the group. Blackshaw and Long (2005) discussed a similar point related to the intra-group dynamics of leisure organizations. They noted that many leisure organizations have their own power dynamics that may make the organization difficult to work within as well as to deal with from the outside (Blackshaw & Long, 2005). Such impenetrable setups can limit the scope of decision-making and effectively lock out specific people or behaviors through tight controls. In addition, leisure organizations with tightly-controlled power dynamics have the potential to be corrupted or exploited. For instance, Sharpe (2003) described a situation in which a close-knit group of board members for a youth sports organization in



Canada was ultimately exploited by a married couple on the board who swindled money from the organization (p. 443). Such instances may be uncommon, but they nevertheless highlight the fact that leisure service organizations are not immune to power issues related to social capital.

### **Social Capital and my Research Project**

In the above text I discussed the background and most pressing issues in social capital research as it relates to the parks and recreation field. In summary, I most closely align my interest in social capital with Putnam's (2000) definition, "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). I utilize a number of different terms to discuss the social nature of social capital, including ties, connections, networks, bonds, and sociability. I believe all of these terms are important because they help describe the various facets of social capital.

Researchers in the parks and recreation literature have highlighted some of the associated outcomes of social capital. These related outcomes include things like civic competence (Hemingway, 2006), civic participation (van Ingen & van Eijck, 2009), and democracy (Glover, Shinew, & Parry, 2005). These are all important outcomes and in some ways relate to my study, but my primary interest is in social capital relating to volunteerism. Specifically, I see social capital being intertwined with a *spirit of social volunteerism*. A spirit of social volunteerism entails the attitude and outlook of volunteers within a volunteer social network who are interested in coordinated action *and* the social connections that result from their efforts. In this way, these volunteers serve two important functions. First, they serve the organization or agency for which they volunteer. Second, they serve one another through trusting and reciprocal

relationships that highly value the sociability and belongingness that goes with volunteering together.

To be clear, a spirit of social volunteerism is not immune from the power issues previously discussed. Volunteer social networks can just as easily be breeding grounds for manipulation, control, exclusivity, and intolerance. I agree with Blackshaw and Long (2005) that one excellent way of addressing issues of power is by focusing on respect. These researchers noted that policies and initiatives undertaken in the name of social capital are all too often short-term, short-sighted affairs in which the government- or research-affiliated officials (what they call “cultural intermediaries”) seek to implement changes without a solid understanding of the local cultural landscape (p. 253). These authors disdain top-down action plans because they are not situated in a way that recognizes specific local conditions and a respect for people in their everyday lives. Therefore, municipal parks and recreation officials must delicately balance their involvement in developing and maintaining volunteer social networks.

I see my efforts at Urbana Park District as a means of helping to develop their volunteer social network. In this regard, social capital ties directly to my study because it is about creating the opportunities and situations for people to interact with one another. However, I do not think that simply providing these opportunities for social interaction will automatically lead to the generation of social capital. Indeed, this situation is one of the problems with Putnam’s formulation of the concept because too often people assume that social opportunities will automatically lead to social capital. This is not necessarily the case, and it may be more important to study the conditions that exist between the social opportunities and the actual development of social capital. Put another way, what factors are important in the bridge between

simple social interactions and the actual development of social capital. Blackshaw and Long (2005) raised a similar point, saying that social capital is not just about being socially connected, but rather people want to affect change. I think this is an excellent point that helps explain the generational change discussed by Putnam (2000) in a way that perhaps Putnam did not foresee. People in younger generations are likely approaching voluntary associations differently. As I see it, a significant part of the new approach to voluntary associations is because the draw of membership is not just on knowing people, but knowing people in order to accomplish something. The focus is on *action*. In the context of parent volunteers in youth sports this has a very real consequence because people want to call on these social networks fairly early on in order to enact plans or implement changes. Such an emphasis on action is very important to me in my research and is largely the reason that I am interested in community-based participatory approaches to research.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Research that requires extensive community involvement has become increasingly popular over the last several decades. These approaches to research have been categorized in a number of different ways, including participatory research, action research, participatory action research, action science or inquiry, cooperative inquiry, participatory community research, empowerment evaluation, and community-based participatory research. This last term, community-based participatory research or CBPR, has been developed in the community and public health fields. Although I am not investigating public health or health inequalities, I am interested in the underlying CBPR philosophy, or orientation, that can help lead to improved youth sports programs through a better understanding of the volunteer experience.

CBPR has emerged, in part, as an effort to address health inequalities by working with community members who are actively involved in all aspects of the research process. Israel and colleagues (2005) defined CBPR as “a commitment to conducting research that shares power with and engages community partners in the research process and that benefits the communities involved, either through direct intervention or by translating research findings into interventions and policy change” (2005, p. 4-5). The emphasis on partners and participants is common throughout CBPR research because of two core beliefs. First, people involved in the study should not just *be studied* but should in fact contribute to all of the phases of the research process. Second, CBPR research is premised on the belief that research is not conducted solely for the sake of knowledge but instead should utilize such knowledge to translate results into action. This action may take various forms but regardless of the form, it is the duty of the

researcher to help see such action implemented. In addition to these two core beliefs, the notion of power sharing is important because it acknowledges the valuable contributions that practitioners and nonacademics, not just researchers, can make to the study.

The specific methods that are used to evaluate the findings of the research may vary because CBPR and other participatory approaches are not just methods but rather are “*orientations to research*” (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003, p. 4, italics in original). CBPR fundamentally starts out with a mindset about the ways in which research should be conducted. This mindset in turn gives rise to trust- and relationship-building with community members in order to form the foundation for carrying out the research. Although it is one of the simpler statements they make on this type of research, I found it very meaningful when Israel and colleagues concluded with joy the “resurgence of interest in partnership approaches...with an emphasis on community participation and influence in research efforts that are beneficial to the communities involved” (1998, p. 193). The basic concept of “partnership approaches” to research can be inclusive of the many different forms of such research in the past, present, and future.

### **William Foote Whyte**

William Foote Whyte is considered to be one of the fathers of CBPR-type research. Whyte utilized the term “participatory action research” (PAR) to describe his and others’ projects that were grounded in the partnerships within their communities of study. In one of his seminal texts on the topic, Whyte outlined three streams of intellectual development from which PAR had evolved: 1) “social research methodology,” 2) “participation in decision making by low-ranking people in organizations and communities, and 3) “sociotechnical thinking regarding

organizational behavior” (1991, p. 7-12). “Social research methodology” referred to Whyte’s critique that many previous studies of organizations made little effort to act, change or improve the conditions that were examined (p. 7). In Whyte’s view, many researchers assumed that their studies would eventually lead to some change but made little effort to follow through on this change themselves. This ambiguity with the implementation of research results was unacceptable to Whyte and thus he sought to combine research with action.

Whyte’s second stream of intellectual development underlying PAR was “participation in decision making by low-ranking people in organizations and communities” (1991, p. 10). Worker participation in decision making entailed a concerted effort to involve low-ranking organization members because their views and opinions had previously been overlooked. Similar to Whyte’s first stream of intellectual development dealing with social research methodology, this intellectual stream acknowledged that utilizing previous problem-solving techniques was not necessarily the best approach, especially when it was yielding few or no new results.

The third stream of intellectual development leading to PAR was “sociotechnical thinking regarding organizational behavior” (Whyte, 1991, p. 11-12). Whyte and his colleagues explained the importance of approaching organizations as social systems not just for research purposes, but also in terms of daily operations and management. Factories and other work settings were not simply machines operated by machines but rather involved real, thinking people who interacted with the technology every day. In the past, Whyte noted that researchers often learned only enough about the technological factors in order to complete their social research. He advocated instead for an approach in which researchers gained a thorough understanding of the technological side of the research.

Whyte and his colleagues (1991) placed a heavy emphasis on both participation- and action-related priorities in their research. Although their research is topically different from the public health focus of many CBPR researchers, Whyte and his colleagues initiated valuable insights from their projects working with private organizations on things like worker participation in decision-making and changes in sociotechnical thinking related to organizational behavior. In many ways Whyte et al. (1991) as well as other PAR researchers helped pave the way for other scholars who were interested in bucking the trend of more traditional approaches to research.

### **Philosophical Roots**

PAR and CBPR evolved as alternative forms of approaching and conducting scientific research and were developed, in large part, as a response to more traditional approaches of research that were being conducted at the time. A short summary of these philosophical roots will be provided, but I fully acknowledge that philosophy of science is a very large topic which others have covered in much greater detail (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The more traditional approaches that PAR and CBPR were developed in response to were rooted in the positivistic paradigm in which researchers were recognized as the experts and studies were conducted in order to determine absolute truths about the world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These absolute truths included not just physical and mathematical sciences like biology and physics but also social sciences such as sociology and anthropology.

In response to the positivist approach, other philosophical paradigms developed that acknowledged the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Two of these paradigms, constructivism and critical theories, evolved from this notion of socially

constructed nature of knowledge to identify and critique the social structures and power dynamics that were embedded in society (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to these paradigms, these social structures and power dynamics made it impossible to determine absolute truths but rather only allowed for situated, contextualized knowledge. For instance, a study about a youth sports program in Urbana would probably tell you a lot about conducting youth sports in the community (e.g. youth and parent attitudes, expectations, and approach to the game) but would not be useful for making broad generalizations to all youth sports programs across the country.

Alternative approaches to conducting research like PAR and CBPR helped address some key philosophical issues within research. Namely, who are the experts? Who gets to create and define knowledge? And, which knowledge is valued and in what way is that knowledge used? Researchers informed by PAR and CBPR principles have tackled these issues by acknowledging that researchers are not the only experts because many different people possess valuable information and knowledge (Fischer [2000] and others in the natural resource decision-making literature have recognized this “local knowledge” as a crucial aspect of planning and management). Working with different people to help create and define knowledge is a key practice because it recognizes the “influence of nonacademic researchers in the process of creating knowledge” (Israel et al., 1998, p. 177). Breaking down such barriers about expertise and knowledge has been a hallmark of PAR and CBPR research.

Whyte acknowledged a similar point about the importance of nonacademic researchers contributing to the knowledge base, saying “Practitioners often bring the pursuit of irrelevant or ill-conceived lines of inquiry to a rapid halt, correcting or refining the questions asked in ways that lead to sharper formulation and more productive research” (Whyte et al., 1991, p. 54). Thus,



practitioner involvement in the research is not just limited to the knowledge they contribute but also to the ways in which they help shape the research, including which questions are asked, how they asked, and to whom they are asked. Whyte et al. (1991) were critical of what they called “normal modes of science” because they felt these traditional approaches to research were not yielding any significant insight into many pressing problems (p. 53). Whyte and his colleagues acknowledge that PAR was only one potential alternative, but based on their research it is apparent that such approaches have great potential for effecting change. In summary, Israel and colleagues described the partnership approaches best when they said, “CBPR is intended to bring together researchers and communities to establish trust, share power, foster co-learning, enhance strengths and resources, build capacity, and examine, and address, community-identified needs and...problems” (Israel, et al, 2005, p. 10).

### **Key Principles of CBPR**

Israel and colleagues (2005) organized nine principles of CBPR based on their extensive review of the literature as well as their own research experiences. They noted that these principles should be viewed with caution because not all may be applicable in every instance. Rather, the most important factor is that all the members of the research partnership (e.g. researchers, practitioners, stakeholders, etc.) agree to the values and ideals that will guide their collective decision-making (Israel, et al., 2005, p. 6). For the purposes of my study, I am interested in focusing on four of these principles as I explore the experiences of parents and others who volunteer for youth sport programs at Urbana Park District.

The first CBPR principle is that “CBPR acknowledges community as a unity of identity” (Israel et al., 2005, p. 7). A unity of identity is something to which people can belong, or have

membership in, which they can identify with the other individuals in the group. Examples of units of identity include a family, neighborhood, soccer team, or a group of friends from work. These units of identity are created in different ways, but they often share in common at least a few specific values, norms, and/or interests. This principle is relevant to my study because the community of identity consists of parents and their children who participate in youth sports at Urbana Park District (UPD). Initially these families may not have significant ties to one another beyond an interest in a particular sport (e.g. soccer, t-ball, etc.). However, it is my belief that through volunteering parents will develop shared experiences that can potentially enhance the social capital amongst people on their team and across the respective league.

The second principle stated that “CBPR builds on strengths and resources within the community” (Israel, et al., 2005, p. 7). This is an important principle because it entails making the best use of what already exists in a community of identity. Some CBPR-type research might be geared towards overhauling an entire system or structure, but more likely the change will come while working in conjunction with people who are already part of an agency, company, or other organization. It is important to recognize the talents and skills of people working in such organizations, as well as the available resources, in order to best position the partnership to be effective. In the case of youth sports at UPD, the youth programs are already fairly successful in terms of end-of-season evaluations (G. Cales, personal communication, 2010). However, the UPD Athletic Coordinators noted that their youth sports programs heavily rely on college-aged students from a nearby university. Although many of these students have a good working knowledge about the sport they are coaching, many do not have experience working with younger children. Thus, the Athletic Coordinators would like to pull more from the pool of

potential parent volunteers who have a vested interest in their child's sport participation and who are more familiar with relating to younger children.

The third principle suggested that "CBPR fosters co-learning and capacity building among all partners" (Israel et al., 2005, p. 8). The authors stated that this should include a "reciprocal exchange of skills, knowledge, and capacity among all partners involved" (p. 8). This is particularly important because different partners bring different sets of skills to the table. Therefore, the research partnership should involve recognizing these different skills as well as learning from one another in order to better address the issues at hand. This principle is relevant to my research at UPD because of the knowledge sharing and co-learning that has already become part of my involvement with youth sports at UPD. My understanding of this particular situation, as well as my research ideas on the topic, has been heavily informed by listening to stories from the two Athletic Coordinators about their youth sports experiences. In addition, my knowledge of the relevant literature on volunteering in youth sports has been useful in further developing ways to approach parents about their involvement as parent volunteers. Therefore, by working together we have learned from one another and begun to develop a strategy for further involving parents as volunteer in youth sports programs.

The fourth principle outlined by Israel and colleagues (2005) was "CPBR integrates and achieves a balance between knowledge generation and intervention for the mutual benefit of all parties" (p. 8). This principle is partially a response to earlier research approaches did not necessarily seek to implement or act upon the knowledge that was gained from the study. The balance between knowledge generation and intervention is important because it highlights the fact that knowledge is generated for scientific purposes as well as for the purpose of enacting new social changes and policies. Agreement upon this balance amongst the different research

partners is important at the outset to ensure the collective is working towards similar goals. In the context of youth sports at UPD, my involvement began with the understanding that the ultimate goal for the two Athletic Coordinators was to improve the quantity and quality of parent volunteers in youth sport programs. My goal has been to help UPD with their efforts while also doing a research project that would provide further knowledge about the volunteer experiences of parents and others at UPD. The primary outlet for my research would be to carry out my dissertation and report the findings in the academic literature. However, a significant secondary goal is to also utilize the knowledge gained from interviews to help improve volunteer recruitment, training, and retention for future youth sport efforts at UPD.

### **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of parents and others who volunteer in a youth sport setting. There are costs to this kind of volunteer involvement, including time, money and responsibility, that should not go overlooked. Indeed, part of this study will focus on these costs and challenges that parents and others deal with as part of their decision to volunteer. Still, even with these costs and challenges many parents also receive significant satisfaction as a result of volunteering to help their child as well as other people's children. However, the specific personal rewards to parents are often overlooked in the literature. Thus, the primary focus of this study will be on the costs and benefits to parents and others as a result of their volunteer involvement. In particular, I am interested in the social costs and benefits to these individuals in terms of social ties and connections that can lead to social capital. Furthermore, I believe the enhanced awareness and understanding of social costs and benefits for parents and others has the potential for improving the overall youth sport program.

These influences on the program may include short-term (e.g. improved volunteer recruitment and retention strategies) as well as longer-term (e.g. conflict resolution amongst well-acquainted volunteers) impacts. Therefore, there are two primary research questions that I will address in this study:

- 1) What is the nature and extent of the relationships volunteers build with children, parents, and other coaches in the program?
- 2) What positive and negative impacts associated with working with children, parents, coaches, and league administrators at Urbana Park District?

The costs and benefits for parent volunteers likely take months or years to fully develop. As a result, this study will focus on interviewing parents and other volunteers at various stages of volunteer involvement. For example, interviews will be conducted with parents who just recently joined as volunteers as well as with parents and coaches who have been a part of the program for a number of years. The goal is to interview a broad spectrum of individuals involved in the program in order to better understand the various elements of parent volunteerism in a youth sport setting.

### **Relationship with UPD**

Beginning in November 2009 the Athletic Coordinators in charge of youth sports at the Urbana Park District (UPD) recognized the need to adapt their parent volunteer recruitment and training process in order to more effectively and successfully run their youth soccer programs. My involvement in this process began in January 2010 after a friend, who coaches his child's soccer team in this league, asked me to accompany him to meet with UPD officials regarding potential ways to improve the program. My interest with this effort quickly grew and I realized

my involvement could be part of a larger participatory study that would yield new knowledge as well as produce information useful to the UPD Athletics staff.

Through several meetings with UPD officials it was agreed that a targeted volunteer recruitment approach was needed in order to more effectively manage the youth soccer program. To be clear, the youth soccer program was already operating at a fairly high standard. Many of the players had participated in multiple seasons with the program, and parental satisfaction scores on end-of season surveys consistently ranked well above average. However, over the last year several parents and coaches expressed the need to have further opportunities for parent involvement. Several personal accounts described parents on the sideline at practices and games who were practically falling onto the field looking for some way to help, but they were unsure how to do so, unclear if they could or should, and were wary of over-stepping their bounds. Thus, a new parent volunteer recruitment strategy was needed in order to more effectively harness those parents who wanted to help and, just as importantly, provide easy ways for all parents to get involved, even if they did not see themselves as a highly knowledgeable or skillful soccer parent.

Since January 2010 when my involvement began, I continued to meet with the two Athletic Coordinators every several months to discuss the youth sports leagues. I regularly typed up my notes after these meetings and distributed them to the Athletic Coordinators to make sure I fairly and accurately recorded their views (a practice encouraged by Whyte, 1991, and others). In addition to this professional involvement I have interacted with both Athletic Coordinators in a more social setting. I played on several adult sports teams with one of the Athletic Coordinators and oftentimes the second Coordinator served as an umpire or official for these games. They are both easy people to get along with and we share a common interest in many

different sports. Thus, I have worked to continue to build my relationship with these two individuals to show them I am interested in the issues they are dealing with and I am committed to helping find practical solutions.

During a meeting in October 2010, the two Athletic Coordinators discussed many of the difficult challenges they are currently facing, including a limited budget, scarcity of volunteers, and challenging coaches and parents. I was understanding of their situation but also excited about the potential of our partnership project to help address some of these issues. Looking forward we discussed my involvement in their program. It was decided that in the spring I would work with the Athletic Coordinators to recruit parent volunteers for coaching and other positions for each team. In turn, the Athletic Coordinators would help connect me with parent volunteers who would be interested in sitting down for an interview to discuss their involvement with the youth sport programs at UPD.

I met with the two Athletic Coordinators again in February 2011 to discuss current updates with the youth soccer program. The Athletic Coordinators discussed their continued interest in finding parent volunteers. However, one note of caution was raised in terms of parent volunteers becoming involved and invested to the point that they pursue their own goals (e.g. heightened emphasis on competition and winning) rather than aligning with UPD youth sport goals. Although they could not find a specific copy of the mission statement for UPD youth sports, the Athletic Coordinators told me that the goal of such programs was to foster fun and fair play through balanced teams with an emphasis on sportsmanship. The Athletic Coordinators acknowledged that many parents may have their own goals and values when it comes to coaching youth sport and thus the early training period for volunteer coaches is crucial in order to reinforce the UPD mission and goals.

Even with the extra emphasis on training and aligning with the UPD mission, the Athletic Coordinators still wished to be careful when promoting parent volunteers. They expressed a fear, albeit not a major one, that an especially committed parent volunteer who coaches a team for multiple seasons may make it difficult to break up a core group of players in order to ensure fairness and competitive balance. This situation with a close knit group of players was, as previously mentioned, the case with a middle-school-aged boys' team that had played together for several years at UPD. When faced with the prospect of breaking the team apart to ensure competitive balance, the long-time coach and the players' parents decided to break away from UPD and form their own travelling team. As will be discussed later, the social benefits for people on this team were significant, but for those people not on the team the situation was often viewed quite differently. Thus, there can be a downside to highly committed parent volunteers that must be carefully monitored to ensure that it does not contradict the UPD mission or negatively impact the overall program.

### **Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures**

Participants for this study were volunteer coaches from the youth soccer program at Urbana Park District (UPD). The primary focus was to interview parent volunteers, but it was also important to note that not all coaches were parents. As such, it was determined that a purposive sample would be the best option for this study because it would enable the interviewer to explore the experiences of different kinds of volunteer coaches (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). A number of the coaches were college-aged students with a background in playing and officiating soccer. Utilizing college-aged student coaches had become a necessity for the UPD Athletic Coordinators because oftentimes not enough parents volunteered to coach.



Furthermore, some of the volunteers were people who used to have children in the UPD sport programs but those children are now grown and are no longer participating. Thus, these volunteers provided useful insight through their long-time involvement as a volunteer and former parent volunteer. Lastly, I interviewed a few former parent volunteers to discuss their experiences, including the reasons they left the program.

Youth soccer volunteer coaches were recruited with the assistance of the two UPD Athletic Coordinators. These staff members were willing to help, especially knowing that the findings of the study might give them a better idea of the ways to attract more parent volunteers in the future. They contacted 29 current and former coaches via email and asked if they would be willing to meet with me for an interview to discuss their volunteer involvement. Only one person they contacted asked not to be included as a potential interviewee. UPD staff then sent me a copy of email addresses for the remaining individuals and I initially emailed the potential participants in mid-May, 2011. I heard a positive response from 11 individuals and immediately began trying to schedule interviews. Unfortunately, many of the potential participants were out of town or too busy during the summer months to meet with me. In early-June I sent a follow-up email to the whole group reminding them of my interest in interviewing them for the study. I then conducted my first interview in mid-June. I sent another follow-up email to the group in mid-August and conducted my remaining interviews between late August and mid-November. In total, 20 individuals gave preliminary agreement to participate in the study. Thirteen interviews were conducted, including one interview with a couple who coached together. Therefore, 14 total people were interviewed for this study. Interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to 3 hours.

## **Interview Guide**

The interview questions for this study focused on the overall experience of volunteers, especially parent volunteers, in a youth sport setting. These questions built off of the core research questions that examined: (1) the nature and extent of the relationships volunteers built with children, parents, and other coaches in the program, and (2) the positive and negative social impacts associated with working with children, parents, coaches, and league administrators at Urbana Park District. These questions were developed after a thorough review of the literature as well as through discussions with UPD staff. The questions were shared with UPD staff before the first interview to allow for feedback. As such, the following questions were developed for interviewing study participants:

- 1) How and why did you first get involved in coaching/volunteering?
- 2) Did you feel obligated to volunteer because your son/daughter was on the team?
- 3) Did you experience any barriers or obstacles when initially trying to volunteer or perhaps later on in your volunteer experience?
- 4) Have you met new people as a result of your volunteering at UPD?
- 5) How many new people do you know through UPD (e.g. parents, coaches, staff, etc.)?
- 6) Have you made new friendships as a result of your volunteering at UPD?
- 7) Do you get together with any of these new friends outside of UPD?
- 8) What has it been like working with (other) parents on your team?
- 9) What are the best parts about volunteering at UPD?
- 10) What are some of the more challenging aspects of volunteering at UPD?
- 11) What has it been like working with the Urbana Park District (UPD) staff and others around the league?
- 12) Have you had any negative interactions during your time volunteering at UPD? If so, has the negativity affected you outside of your time at UPD?
- 13) How would you describe the character of this league?
- 14) What have been some of the best lessons you have learned as a coach/volunteer?
- 15) If there was something that you could improve, what would it be?
- 16) Describe the officiating – too soft, too strict, knowledgeable, inexperienced, instructive?

These questions represented a general interview guide. As discussed by Patton (1990), the importance of having a general interview guide is not about having a strict set of questions that are asked in the same order to every participant. Rather, the focus is on covering the range of

important issues while adapting the order to each individual interview. Indeed, many of the interviews flowed from one topic to the next, sometimes with little prompting from me. To be clear, the first interview question listed above was in fact the same one initially proposed to all study participants. However, as discussed later in the Findings section, the responses to that opening question frequently spawned several other thoughts or topics that the participants wished to discuss.

I conducted all of the interviews for this study, face-to-face, at a time and location mutually agreed upon with the participants. Most of the participants asked me to meet them at their work or in their homes, although a few interviews took place at restaurants, my office, and at my house. I used a hand-held digital recorder to tape each individual interview, and I transcribed each interview shortly after it was conducted using Express Scribe software. Brief member checks were conducted with participants via email, but no significant changes were recommended. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym during transcription to help protect their confidentiality. During the last few interviews the responses to my interview questions were not producing any significantly new ideas. Thus, after the fourteenth interview it was determined that I reached data saturation.

### **Method of Analysis**

Grounded theory was utilized as the method of analysis in this study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) first outlined grounded theory as an inductive method of analyzing qualitative data. Inductive theory building refers to the notion of starting with a topic of study and examining it in such a way that allows relevant categories and themes to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In other words, grounded theory is an approach in which the theory is derived from the data (as

opposed to more traditional forms of data analysis in which theories are developed and then tested).

Grounded theorists rely on the participants themselves as the source of data; the information participants share is used to form the categories that describe the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The result is a theory with a good fit with the data because the data itself was the source of ideas and categories for organizing practical and theoretical concepts. One primary tool used in grounded theory analysis is constant comparison which is done to compare similarities and differences within the data that lead to the generation of abstract categories. Categories of data are developed after reading and re-reading the data in order to develop core themes as well as the relationships among the themes. These categories and themes, and their associated details, will then lead to the formation of a theory that is grounded in the data. Thus, in grounded theory, data collection, analysis and theory are interconnected in a series of reciprocal relationships (Strauss & Corbin, p. 23).

Coding is the process in grounded theory in which data are analyzed, categorized, and then developed into theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). There are three forms of coding in grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding refers to the initial process of identifying concepts and categories in the data, including distinguishing the ways in which categories differ (p. 101). Open coding is done throughout the data collection process as to make sense of the different kinds of information shared by the study participants. Axial coding involves “the process of relating categories to their subcategories” based on their similar properties (p. 123). Whereas open coding is about distinguishing differences, axial coding is conducted during data collection and analysis to begin to understand similarities within the data. A solid understanding of the similarities within the

data allows the researcher to begin to form categories and subcategories that help describe the situation being studied. Finally, selective coding refers to the integration and refinement of the major categories into theory (p. 143). Selective coding must be preceded by open and axial coding because the categories and subcategories from the data are what give rise to theory (selective coding will be discussed later). Ultimately, the goal of grounded theory is to develop theory that is grounded in the categories from the data.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) noted that the grounded theory approach to analyzing data is particularly powerful because it is helpful for both understanding the world “out there” as well as developing strategies to deal with the most pertinent issues that emerge in the data (p. 9). Thus, grounded theory is particularly useful in the context of this study because it focuses both on knowledge and theory generation as well practical strategies grounded in the data. The purpose of this study was to better understand the social benefits and costs of volunteering for a public agency. As such, grounded theory provided a useful approach for understanding and categorizing the ideas discussed by the study participants. In turn, this information was then used to generate new theory about volunteering for a public agency as well as specific strategies for improving the volunteer management strategies at Urbana Park District.

### **Process of Analysis**

Analysis of the data was a constant and on-going process throughout the data collection phase. As previously mentioned, each interview was transcribed shortly after it was conducted. At the completion of each transcription I wrote or tape recorded a short summary of the major points that the participants had raised during the interview. Strauss and Corbin (1998) used the term memos to describe these notes, summaries, and short analyses. For the purposes of this

study, two main forms of memos were used: code notes and theoretical notes. Code notes refer to memos written as part of the open, axial, and selective coding process (Strauss & Corbin, p. 217). In the early stages of data collection these code notes described my basic impressions of the data, including any differences or similarities I observed from one transcript to the next. In later stages of data collection and early analysis these notes were much broader, suggesting potential connections between categories as well as some categories that could be combined. Theoretical notes include memos that summarize the researcher's thoughts and ideas about the data as well as what needs to be done or considered to move towards finalizing the theory (p. 237). These summaries often went further than the code notes in terms of relating the theory to the literature, highlighting the connections among categories that could lead to a larger theory, and suggesting potential avenues for future research.

The information and ideas from the memos I wrote were utilized in several ways. I used code notes to highlight what I learned from each interview to help guide me in subsequent interviews. For instance, the first several participants in the study mentioned the importance of their spouses being on the sidelines and serving as sources of feedback as well as socially connecting the parents and the coach. I had not originally anticipated this concept and thus brought out this factor in future interviews. In another example, the fourth and fifth interviewees described their experiences with core groups of children who stayed together on a team for multiple seasons. The fourth interviewee had a negative experience several years ago with a core group, while in a separate, more recent instance the fifth interviewee described his positive experience as the coach of a core group of children. After hearing in-depth about this concept I was then able to ask all subsequent participants their thoughts and experiences related to core groups. Thus, the information documented in my code notes necessitated additional interview

questions to subsequent participants in order to better understand the pressing and relevant topics being discussed.

After approximately every third interview I went back through the memos and code notes I had written at the end of each previous transcription. I did this review because I wanted to get a sense of the connections between what the latest interviewees had said and what others had stated earlier. This process was extremely fruitful in that it confirmed many of the early patterns that had emerged. For example, all of the initial study participants described their social experience primarily in terms of their relationships with the children, not the parents. With an understanding of this information, I was then better prepared to ask subsequent participants about their relationships with fellow parents *and* the children on their team. The majority of individuals viewed their volunteer coaching experience as one focused on the children and, as a result, many could go into much greater detail on their time with the children versus the time they spent interacting with parents from their team. Therefore, the process of periodically reviewing each of the transcripts to confirm what the most recent study participants had said was beneficial for understanding the data as a whole.

I also utilized code notes as I periodically went back through the transcripts and recorded the most common patterns and themes. As previously mentioned, after approximately every third interview I went back through my summaries and memos from each transcript to compare what I recently heard with what had been discussed by earlier interviewees. For the first six interviews I recorded my thoughts and notes on sheets of paper that I kept with my interviewing material. These memos, or codes notes, were an important part of the open coding process as well as part of the preliminary axial coding process. After transcribing the sixth interview I

decided it would be best to begin an electronic document, separate from each transcript, which would enable me to record and better organize common themes and patterns to that point.

As I transcribed subsequent interviews I transferred information to this new electronic document in order to keep track of the most important aspects being discussed. Oftentimes the new information fit with a pattern or theme that had already emerged from the data. However, in some cases a new topic was described that then became its own theme heading to potentially be added to in the future. These steps were important parts of the open and axial coding process because they focused on the differences and similarities in the data and the resulting categories. When I finished the final transcription I then went back through the initial six interviews and double-checked to make sure that there was a good fit between what the interviewees said and the themes and patterns that had been described. This final check showed that there was a good fit among the themes and material from all of the interviews.

Repeatedly going through the data also gave me an opportunity to address any lingering problems. In some places the transcription was difficult to hear or understand so I made a note to myself to return to the tapes later for clarification. These efforts were almost always successful and provided me with some crucial additional information in certain spots. In other areas in the transcripts I had written memos to myself to encapsulate my thoughts at that time (these memos included both code notes as well as theoretical notes). These notes were extremely helpful in outlining my initial thoughts as well as connecting them to the core purposes of the study.

By the time I completed the transcriptions I already had a preliminary analysis of the findings from my constant checking and comparing. I then went through each interview one final time to compare each of the participant's comments with the overall themes and patterns.



This final step in the open coding process confirmed the themes and patterns that I had previously highlighted. Once I completed open coding and the process of distinguishing information into categories I was then ready to fully move on to the process of axial coding in which I related the categories and subcategories in terms of similarities (Glaser & Strauss, 1998). I had already begun utilizing axial coding part way through the data collection and analysis process. However, with the completion of data collection I was then able to shift my focus to the similarities among categories that would allow for grouping similar categories together.

The process of axial coding, or grouping similar categories together, began with more than 60 themes and patterns. This process entailed comparing the themes themselves as well as the specific details within each theme. Similar themes were grouped next to each other and, where relevant, combined into a single theme or category. For instance, participants were asked about the worst or most challenging parts of volunteering at Urbana Park District (UPD). During the open coding phase the responses to this question were listed together under one broad category. After further analysis of the data it was apparent that people dealt with many challenges related to volunteer coaching, including work, family, children on the team, the children's parents, and the UPD staff. These findings showed that participants interpreted this question in two distinct ways: first, as challenges related to work and family that were primarily outside the field of soccer, and second, as challenges related to children, parents, and UPD staff in and around the soccer field. Thus, these data were classified into two separate subcategories under the broader category of the most challenge aspects of volunteer coaching at UPD. The data were further distinguished by the specific frustration or challenge, such as children or parents, and similar information from participants was grouped together to show the depth of these ideas.

Many of the more than 60 categories of data were combined to make a single broad category with multiple subcategories. The example above of the worst or most challenging aspects of volunteer coaching is one such example. However, in some instances there were themes that did not initially appear to be related, but ultimately these themes fit together. One such example related to the importance of scheduling and time management. Many participants discussed the importance of coordinating their schedule with their spouse and their children, but they did not always discuss these efforts as a worst or challenging part of volunteer coaching at UPD. Ultimately, however, the struggle to effectively juggle one's schedule fit best with what others discussed in terms of the challenge of work and family demands. In another example, some participants discussed the challenges of having a college student coach for their son or daughter's team. The challenges with having a college student coach were not long-lasting but instead had prompted several of the participants to get involved as coaches. Thus, this category of information was more closely aligned with other categories that focused on the ways people got involved in coaching soccer at UPD. Therefore, the process of data analysis entailed a careful review of the themes as well as the specific details within each theme in order to determine which categories and subcategories fit together best.

In other instances there was a theme or pattern that did not fit with other elements of the data. For instance, one participant explained the importance of having an assistant coach who was knowledgeable about soccer. Although this participant felt strongly about this notion, it was not something that other participants expressed during their interviews. In another example, a few participants mentioned their preference for coaching at a specific park. The reasons for these preferences varied and were not related to other themes from the data. A third example was one participant who discussed his strong religious background as a major influence on his

approach to working with kids. He also felt strongly about this concept, but no other participant mentioned something remotely similar to this strong religious influence. Therefore, themes that did not match up with or were not supported by other themes were not included in the final analysis.

Selective coding is the third and final form of coding in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Selective coding took place in this study toward the end of data collection; it coincided with the latter stages of axial coding. Whereas axial coding was a process of grouping together similar categories, selective coding was the process of identifying the overarching category among the main themes (Strauss & Corbin). The overarching category formed the core of the theoretical framework that related and integrated all the other categories (Pandit, 1996; Strauss & Corbin). Strauss and Corbin discussed the overarching category in terms of the “story line” because it is a narrative about the core phenomenon that is then integrated with the other categories. Through careful examination of the categories in this study, it was clear that the overarching category or story line was volunteer motivations.

Understanding volunteer motivations was a crucial aspect of this study. All of the participants said their primary motivation to coach was to help children. This motivation was true for parents as well as non-parents, and oftentimes it extended beyond helping one’s own child to include helping other children. Many participants also explained that the desire to help children extended beyond the soccer field to include teaching children lessons about life. However, a secondary benefit or outcome for many participants was that they developed social ties and connections as a result of their volunteer involvement. Many participants described relationships they developed with the kids on their team, but several participants also discussed relationships with fellow parents in the soccer program. Thus, the overarching category or story

line related to volunteer motivations, but an important subcategory was that participants experienced important social outcomes resulting from their volunteerism. Therefore, the selective coding process resulted in the development of a new theory, called the theory of secondary outcomes for parent volunteers, that describes these important secondary outcomes.

The process of open, axial, and selective coding resulted in six main themes that are described below in the Finding chapter. The theory of secondary outcomes for parent volunteers will be discussed in the Discussion chapter.

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

In addition to the method and process of analysis it is also important to discuss the trustworthiness of the data. Guba (1981) highlighted the importance of establishing trustworthy qualitative data, particularly in reference to the established modes of quantitative and positivistic research. Guba described four main criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of data: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. He believed that the philosophical roots of the new and emerging approaches to research necessitated new terminology to describe the trustworthiness of such data. Therefore, Guba developed new terms for addressing each criteria due to the differences in established modes of research (what he called “rationalistic”) versus emerging qualitative approaches to research (what he called “naturalistic”).

First, truth value refers to the trust or confidence in the truth of the findings of a particular group of people in a specific setting (Guba, 1981). Established modes of quantitative research typically addressed truth value in terms of internal validity, but Guba utilized the term credibility to address truth value. Second, applicability entails the degree to which the findings of a specific study are suitable or applicable in other settings with other people (Guba). Established modes of

quantitative research frequently addressed applicability in terms of external validity, whereas Guba utilized the term transferability to address applicability. Third, consistency refers to the ability with which researchers could replicate the study in a similar setting with similar research subjects (Guba). Established modes of quantitative research commonly addressed consistency in terms of reliability; however, Guba utilized the term dependability to address consistency. Fourth, neutrality entailed the degree to which the findings of a study arose from the participants and the specific study setting rather than the researcher's biases and motivations (Guba). Established modes of quantitative research mainly addressed neutrality in terms of objectivity, whereas Guba utilized the term confirmability to address neutrality. Thus, Guba outlined new terms for addressing the four main criteria for trustworthiness of data: truth value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability), and neutrality (confirmability).

Krefting (1991) and Shenton (2004) built upon Guba's (1981) four criteria for evaluating trustworthiness of qualitative data. These researchers operated in separate disciplines, but each described a set of strategies for addressing the trustworthiness criteria laid out by Guba. For instance, to help establish credibility both Krefting and Shenton recommended an interviewing technique that utilized iterative questioning. Iterative questioning refers to the process of "return[ing] to matters previously raised by an informant and extract[ing] related data through rephrased questions" (Shenton, p. 67). I used this iterative approach in my study by repeating questions from multiple angles to ensure a true or valid framing of the data. Furthermore, Shenton noted the importance of debriefing sessions between the researcher and his or her superiors. To address this strategy I periodically met with my adviser, Dr. Kim Shinew, to update her on my findings as well as the progress of my study. She provided useful feedback on both the methodology of the study as well as the content of my analysis that helped guide me in

subsequent interviews. Thus, several steps were taken in this study to address the credibility of the data.

Krefting (1991) and Shenton (2004) also described strategies for establishing transferability. To be sure, Krefting and Shenton as well as Guba (1981) discussed the limitations with trying to establish transferability in qualitative research because oftentimes the goal is not to generalize to a population. Krefting noted the distinction with qualitative research, in comparison to qualitative forms of research, is “situational uniqueness; the particular group studied may not relate to others and hence conclusions may not be transferrable” (p. 220). She goes on to say that the representative of the participants for the particular group is important for establishing the basis for transferability. In this study I utilized purposive sampling in order to interview a variety of different volunteer coaches, including parent volunteer coaches as well as some college student-aged coaches. Based on my conversations with the UPD athletics staff as well as my own observations, the findings from this study provide a solid “baseline understanding” from which future studies can compare (Gross, 1998, as seen in Shenton). In addition, this study used grounded theory and thus a collection of categories and subcategories were utilized to develop a theory that is grounded in the data (this theory will be discussed in more detail in the Discussion chapter). Therefore, the theory from the study’s findings is grounded in the data and provides a useful starting point by which future studies can compare.

The strategies for establishing dependability rest largely on the researcher’s ability to provide detailed descriptions of the exact methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991; Shenton, 2004). Shenton discussed the need for extensive detail about the research processes so that the study design may be a “prototype model” (p. 71). Carefully documenting these steps not only helps others evaluate the rigor of the study according

to the appropriate research practices, but it also enables future researchers to replicate the study. To establish dependability in this study a detailed description of the research processes is provided in the subsequent analysis sections. The data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings was strongly influenced by Strauss and Corbin's (1990; 1998) work on grounded theory. Further, potential changes to the study as well as crucial lessons learned from conducting this study are described in the Discussion section.

Confirmability is the last factor for establishing the trustworthiness of the data. Guba (1981), Krefting (1991), and Shenton (2004) all recommended reflexivity as a strategy for managing confirmability. Whereas more established or traditional research approaches sought to achieve objectivity, these researchers instead point to the need for researchers to be open about their personal influences on their work. Opening up about one's interests or motivations, and keeping track of the shifts in these views throughout the research process, allows for a deeper understanding of the researcher's perspective (Shenton). As a result, the researcher should be honest with himself/herself as he/she describes the data and resulting interpretations. For example, I kept such notes and memos throughout the research process to record my impressions and thoughts. My initial assumption was that participants would experience some level of social benefit as a result of their volunteer involvement. However, I did not expect the strong negative social interactions people experienced with children, adults, and UPD staff. Furthermore, after preliminary analysis it did not appear that the volunteer coaches experienced much if any social benefit, largely because they were so focused on the kids. However, further analysis showed that most participants experienced at least some social benefits, just not as I had expected. These findings as well as my challenges as a researcher and the limitations of this study are discussed in more detail in the Discussion chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

In this section I will discuss the findings of the study. First, I describe the demographic and background information of the study participants based on a short form they completed before beginning their individual interviews. I also describe the factors that the participants considered when deciding to coach. The themes that emerged from the data are then described. The primary emphasis that volunteer coaches placed on children as well as the importance these coaches placed on lessons transcending soccer is discussed. I also discuss the most challenging aspects related to volunteering coaching at Urbana Park District (UPD) as well as ways the participants feel UPD could improve the youth soccer league. I conclude with an explanation of the positive and negative social outcomes resulting from keeping together a core group of children and their parents on the same team for several years.

#### **Demographic and Background Information**

Participants were asked to complete a demographic information sheet prior to beginning their interview [see Appendix A]. The goal of this demographic information sheet was to collect some information about each of the participants, including their previous volunteering experience. The information on the sheet was then used during each interview as a reference for the participant's background. Overall, nine of the participants were between the ages of 26 and 44 [see Table 1]. The three participants in the 18-25 category were the three college-aged student coaches. The breakdown by sex was three women and eleven men. Nearly all of the participants self-reported as White/Caucasian. Nine of the 14 study participants were married,



and one was divorced. The other three participants, all college-aged students, were single.

These same three participants were the only ones interviewed who did not have children.

Overall, the participants were a well-educated group with all having at least some college and six having some form of graduate degree.

**TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Grew up in Urbana-Champaign, IL</b>
3 ..... 18-25	9 ..... No
2 ..... 26-34	5 ..... Yes
7 ..... 35-44	
2 ..... 45+	<b>Length of Residence in Urbana-Champaign, IL</b>
	3 ..... 0-5 years
<b>Sex</b>	1 ..... 6-10 years
3 ..... Female	4 ..... 11-15 years
11 ..... Male	1 ..... 16-20 years
	5 ..... 20+ years
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Time spent volunteering at Urbana Park District</b>
1 ..... Multi-racial	3 ..... 1-2 seasons
1 ..... Hispanic	2 ..... 3-5 seasons
12 ..... White	4 ..... 6-9 seasons
.....	4 ..... 10+ seasons
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Other volunteering efforts</b>
3 ..... Single	4 ..... None
9 ..... Married	5 ..... Some (1-2 other activities)
1 ..... Divorced	4 ..... Lots (3+ other activities)
<b>Number of Children</b>	
3 ..... No children	
1 ..... 1 child	
5 ..... 2 children	
4 ..... 3 children	
1 ..... 4 children	
<b>Highest Education Completed</b>	
2 ..... High school, some college	
5 ..... Bachelor's	
1 ..... Bachelor's, some graduate	
3 ..... Master's	
3 ..... PhD	

In addition to demographic information, participants were also asked to complete several questions regarding their residence in the Urbana-Champaign area, their time spent volunteering at Urbana Park District (UPD), and their other volunteering efforts outside UPD [see Table 1]. This information was believed to be important because it might further highlight the potential difference in social costs and benefits resulting from volunteer coaching at UPD. Of the 14 participants, 5 had grown up in the Urbana-Champaign area while 9 were from other parts of the state or country. More than half of the participants had lived in the Champaign-Urbana area for at least 10 years.

Study participants had volunteered at UPD for a range of different times [see Table 1 and Table 2]. This was, in part, intentional because I attempted to interview people with varying levels of coaching experience. Three of the participants had been coaching at UPD for one to two seasons, and two others had been coaching for three to five seasons. However, the majority of coaches had considerable experience coaching at UPD. Four individuals had coached between six and nine seasons, and four others had coached for more than ten seasons.

**TABLE 2: PARTICIPANT PROFILES**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Time Spent Volunteering at UPD (years)</b>
Steve	31	Male	3.5
Ivan	37	Male	3.5
Alex	43	Male	0.5
Neil	44	Male	15
Nolan	49	Male	10
Carl	22	Male	1.5
Julie	20	Female	1.5
Jim	25	Male	3
Rex	39	Male	1.5
Ned	45	Male	7
Brad	38	Male	4
Uta	37	Female	4
Saul	41	Male	4
Bev	28	Female	0.5

Participants in the study had a range of previous experience working with kids (all names listed are pseudonyms). Carl was the only participant that mentioned he had no previous background working with children; the rest of the participants had at least some, if not extensive previous experience working with children. Rex explained that his interactions with young children came mostly from being on the sidelines for most of his son's soccer practices and games. Although he had not been formally involved as a coach, he was always around to help and enjoyed being part of the process. Another participant, Jim, mentioned that he had done some babysitting when he was a kid, but other than that he had not had any formal experience working with children. Saul stated that prior to coaching his only experience with young children, outside of his own, was volunteering at his son's school. Others, such as Steve, had spent considerable amounts of time working with children as part of their college experience and early job training. Bev expressed a similar background in that several of her previous part-time and full-time jobs entailed working with young children. Others, like Julie and Ned, explained that growing up they had always worked around children, either at the local pool or through the park district in their home town. Thus, most participants had at least some experience working with children, and several participants had extensive experience working with children.

Study participants also described a range of soccer-specific experience before they began volunteering at UPD. Two participants, Uta and Bev, had no previous experience with the sport, either playing or coaching. Interestingly, the only other female coach in the study, Julie, had played soccer from a very young age and thus had extensive soccer-specific experience. Several other participants, including Rex and Ned, explained that they had played a little when they were really young, but the majority of their experience was in playing other sports. However, both mentioned that the general principles from these other sports were things that generally

transferred to their soccer coaching experience. The majority of the remaining participants mentioned that they had extensive experience playing soccer. Many of these individuals played soccer from a young age through high school, and some had even continued playing as adults. A few of these participants, including Ivan and Nolan, had significant experience playing soccer as children and young adults; they then transitioned to soccer coaching, and had coached soccer at multiple age levels before starting to volunteer at UPD. Therefore, with a few exceptions, most of the volunteer coaches in this study had played and/or coached soccer before.

There were several major themes that emerged from this study. The first theme, The Decision to Coach, encapsulates the reasons that individuals in this study chose to volunteer. The second theme was Children First, Parents Second. This theme highlights to the major motivations and benefits associated with volunteer coaching at UPD. Third, participants described many of their experiences which can be described in terms of It's Not All About Soccer. This theme points to the importance that volunteers placed on soccer-specific lessons transcending beyond the soccer field. The fourth theme, The Most Challenging Aspects, relates the difficulties associated with being a volunteer coach at UPD. The fifth theme was Program Improvements Needed which discusses the changes that participants would like to see at UPD. The last theme discussed, Core Groups, describes the positive and negative results to the approach of keeping together the same group of children over many soccer seasons.

### **The Decision to Coach**

The initial question posed to each study participant proved to be far more enlightening than originally expected. Participants were asked, "How and why did you first get involved in coaching or volunteering?" This question was supposed to be an easy first question to help get

participants to open up about their volunteer coaching experiences at Urbana Park District (UPD). The main intent behind this question was to better understand the different paths people took to be a volunteer coach. Indeed, Cuskelly (2008) noted that one of the main ways people got involved as volunteers and volunteer coaches was simply that someone asked. Thus, I was interested to see if volunteers at UPD had been asked or persuaded to commit their time to being a coach. However, after interviewing the first several participants it was clear that this question would provide far greater detail than originally expected. Participants discussed their volunteer involvement at UPD, but they also expanded this discussion into a much broader one. Specifically, participants responded to this opening question along two main lines: their philosophy behind volunteering as well as their interest in volunteering as a way to help their children and sometimes due to a lack of better options.

First, several people talked about volunteering as a way to give back to the community. Such feelings about giving back to the community were often rooted in an upbringing that emphasized volunteering and other civic-minded behavior. For instance, Ned discussed his reasons for volunteering as “[My mom] was always volunteering at the school, at the church. So it’s a history of that.” as well as “it’s something that I see as my responsibility to pay back. And, cause if we don’t support the park district programs for the kids, we’re not going to have them.” Ned’s comments reflect a commitment to volunteering that was modeled by his parents early on in his life. His remarks also point to the necessity of volunteers in order to provide recreational opportunities for his children as well as other people’s children. Another participant mentioned a similar commitment to volunteering that was instilled by his parents and continues to influence his thinking as an adult:

Volunteering is, the community's given a lot to me. I've been here a long time. So I need to give back to the community. And if I'm not willing to give back to the community, why should I expect anyone else to do it? So I try to give back and hopefully by my example others will join in and recognize that they should be giving back as well. And through more volunteerism in the community we'll get more done. For the community[and] for the kids. – Neil

Neil's comments on volunteering and his philosophy of volunteering pointed to several things. First, he feels a sense of civic responsibility to volunteer because he has benefitted from opportunities in the community. As a result, he secondly wants to get involved as a volunteer because he wishes to lead by example. And third, by inspiring more volunteerism it is his hope that more things will get done for the betterment of the community and the children within. This last point is particularly interesting because it relates to Putnam's (1993) definition of social capital that hinges on coordinated action to facilitate action. Neil had a very well thought-out explanation for his approach to volunteering, and his actions appeared to match this philosophy. However, as I will explain later, Neil's actions to keep together a core group of children resulted in mixed feelings by many of the study's participants.

Second, many participants explained that their involvement as a youth sport coach was because their children wanted to play the sport. In some cases, the parent was looking for a way to be more involved in his/her kid's lives. Alex explained that he volunteered as a way to spend time with children. Others, like Steve, took that feeling a step further to include their knowledge of soccer: "I got into coaching at Urbana Park District because my kids wanted to play sports. And I knew enough about the sports they wanted to play that I felt comfortable leading more than just them. I felt comfortable leading other people's kids [too]." Thus, Steve volunteered

not just because his child wanted to play, but also because he was familiar and comfortable with the sport. Knowledge and comfort with the sport of soccer was mentioned by nearly all the participants as at least a somewhat important factor in their decision to coach. Indeed, Steve made a point later in the interview to say that if his child was interested in basketball that he would not become a basketball coach because he did not know enough about the sport to be an effective coach. However, a few participants had volunteered to coach despite little if any previous soccer experience. Uta, who coached with her husband and fellow study participant Brad, explained that they volunteered as a way to spend time together as a family. And Bev described her volunteer coaching as mostly a matter of being able to help so that her child could have the experience. Thus, both women, as well as many of the other participants in the study, served as volunteer coaches as a way to facilitate their child's involvement in youth soccer.

Several participants also discussed their initial involvement as a volunteer coach was due to the poor quality of a coach they witnessed during their child's first season playing soccer. In nearly every case, the participants were commenting on the poor quality of a college student aged coach. The park district often does not have enough parents volunteer to be coaches and thus must turn to college students to help fill gaps in their youth sport coaching ranks (Greg Cales, personal communication, 2010). The result, according to many of the study participants, is that you get college students who are ineffective at leading soccer practices and games for teams of children. Neil explained his dissatisfaction with the college student coach of his child's first team, saying "[The college student coach had] absolutely no idea how to play the game, no format to the field, no nothing. And the kids weren't learning anything other than, kick the ball at the goal. It was horrible. And he clearly had no management of the kids or understanding of

the sport.” Therefore, many of the parent volunteer coaches grew so frustrated with the quality of the coaching that they decided to step up and coach themselves.

One parent volunteer coach, Ivan, explained that he had an extensive soccer and soccer coaching background, but he initially did not wish to get involved because “I was not going to be *that dad*. I didn’t want to be the guy that just coaches his son the whole time because he thought he knew it all. Well I know why that guy does what he does now” (emphasis in original). Ivan gave a frustrated laugh after this acknowledgement, noting that the college student coach of his oldest child’s first team was well-meaning but he/she barely emphasized learning the basics of soccer. He went on to explain that his experience on the sidelines that first season was insightful in that he witnessed several parent volunteer coaches of other teams that were extremely effective in teaching the basics of soccer. Thus, Ivan concluded that he would have to get involved as a volunteer coach in order for his son to have a positive initial learning experience with UPD soccer.

Three of the participants interviewed for this study were college-aged student coaches. One, Jim, was a graduate student while the other two, Carl and Julie, were undergraduate students, all at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Jim discussed a similar trepidation as Steve (mentioned earlier) in that it was difficult talking to parents because they were older than him as well as the fact that he did not have children. Jim said, “And me as a 24 year old, you know, it’s tough for me to [tell parents my expectations for them and their kids]. I don’t know how parents feel about me reprimanding their kids and stuff like that.” Therefore, in some instances there was an uneasy tension between the college-aged student coaches and the parents of the kids on the team. These difficult situations likely negatively affected the social



outcomes for the college-aged student coaches because they experienced this additional pressure and tension.

### **Children First, Parents Second**

One of the main goals of this study was to understand the social impacts associated with working with children, parents, coaches, and league administrators at Urbana Park District (UPD). In particular, I was interested in the social benefits for parent volunteer coaches. The data showed a range in the level of social interactions, from short and casual to longer-term (these longer-term social interactions will be discussed later in the findings). Several participants in the study mentioned short social interactions with other parents before and after games on Saturday mornings. Additionally, Steve discussed hanging around after practice to answer questions and briefly chat with parents. However, several of the participants noted that they did not consider their time as a volunteer coach as an opportunity for social interaction. For example, Bev explained that, “I was busy on the field most of the times. There was really not a lot of opportunities for talking to them [the parents]. ... I wasn’t really in it to make friends with other parents. So I guess that wasn’t my purpose.” Bev’s experience of focusing on the children was a common theme with many volunteer coaches because, as they said, they spent the majority of their time at practices and games interacting with the children. For instance, Alex noted that “it was harder to talk to the parents because I was on the field. I was with the kids.” and Jim stated “I may see them [parents on the sidelines], but I’m talking to my kids.” Therefore, all of the participants in this study framed their interactions on the soccer field primarily in terms of interacting with the children.

Despite the short and casual nature of many of the social interactions for the participants, and the emphasis on interacting with the children, many of the coaches experienced at least some social benefits as a result of their volunteer experiences at UPD. These social benefits were often realized through chance interactions in public places. For instance, Steve noted that just this past week “I had a child come up to me that was not even on my soccer team... He was like “Hi Coach Steve!”” Similarly, Ivan stated, “I see kids all over. I see kids all over town, that call me coach.” Such chance and infrequent interactions were not something that most participants initially discussed when the question of social benefits was raised. However, after probing for further detail, many participants discussed these interactions as pleasant reminders of their time coaching as well as their connection to the community.

One individual in particular, Alex, discussed volunteer coaching as a way to become “more integrated in my community and get to know folks.” Alex explained that in his early adult years he moved around a lot for work, and now he is looking to settle down in this community. His volunteering has provided an unexpected bonus:

[At his child’s elementary school] all the kids are queued up out front before the bell rings and so as we’re standing there with this queue of 50 kids, suddenly there’s ten of them all waving at me because I’m their coach. And so I got to know those kids, and I gradually got to know those parents. So having some familiarity with a lot of these kids in line was quite nice and unexpected. It wasn’t just a mass of kids I didn’t know. I knew them and I could talk to them. I could, “See you tonight.” Or “We’ve got a game tomorrow.” Just things like, just having little kids to talk to was kind of nice. I felt a little more integrated... So that was a nice social side.

Thus, as a result of his volunteer coaching efforts, Alex has been pleasantly surprised by the social opportunities he has had with children and parents from soccer. Another parent volunteer coach, Saul, relayed a similar story: “you see a kid at school, walking your own kid to school in the morning and you see another kid. And you fist bump them when they walk past. You know, “See you at practice tonight!” Or, “Man I wish you were still on my team.”” These kinds of expected social interactions were repeated by several of the participants as a meaningful benefit to their volunteering coaching.

In addition to having chance interactions with children in public places, several participants also mentioned chance interactions with soccer parents in public venues. Nolan described his interactions with former players and their parents at a local restaurant as well as at the local public library. He noted that most of the parents remember him, and it is nice when they update him on what is happening with their children. Rex, another volunteer coach, explained that although he does not regularly socially interact with other soccer parents, it has been nice to get to know his son’s friend’s parents and to chat with them at things like school functions. Therefore, it seems that the connections originally developed through soccer have provided the seed or spark for future social interactions. As discussed earlier in the social capital section, such connections may take years to develop into more meaningful friendships and relationships.

Ned, another volunteer coach, described several other families with children about the same age as his own children that were involved in UPD programs. These other “sport families” had children playing sports and participating in the same activities as his children, often on the same teams. Ned related that he and his family have “made a lot of strong friendships [through UPD sports].” When I asked him if these relationships went beyond just the soccer field Ned

responded, “Yes, that’s developed over time. There are some pretty good friendships with them.” He went on to explain that “even when these parents, their kids are sometimes on the opposing teams, afterwards we get together, we talk. I think at this [younger age] level it’s very social.” Thus, over time Ned and his family developed strong friendships that originally started with the seed or spark from being involved in UPD youth sports. Saul discussed a somewhat similar situation to what Ned called his fellow “sport families:”

But I’ve also become very close with a lot of the parents. I mean, it’s been a new social avenue for me. And not that that was my goal. But it has become a new social avenue for me to have, to meet kids and parents. And these kids are awesome. And their parents are great. And it’s nice to just know more people. To be able to say “Hi!” in the community. Or go out to dinner with someone once in a while. But you know, you just started off as, you met them casually through coaching and now all of a sudden you’ve kind of become friends with them.

Saul was enthusiastic about this “new social avenue,” saying that it was quite unexpected but very welcome. Nevertheless, building such relationships likely takes several seasons or years of interacting with fellow soccer parents and families. Both Ned and Saul had been coaching for several years which only reinforces Ned’s assertion that the friendships had “developed over time.”

Participants mentioned a couple of other factors that enhanced their social interactions with fellow soccer parents. First, Facebook usage was discussed by several parent volunteer coaches as a way to keep in touch with people they met through UPD soccer. Uta noted that her and Brad utilized Facebook to maintain relationships with fellow soccer parents, even when their children no longer played on the same team together. Saul also discussed using Facebook to

stay in touch with fellow soccer parents. He said that these kinds of Facebook friendships were much more meaningful than ones with friends from grade school because with fellow soccer parents they can share pictures and stories about their children growing up together. The second factor that enhanced social interactions with fellow soccer parents related to coach's wives. The first several interviewees all mentioned the importance of their spouses when it came to coaching soccer. The volunteer coaches primarily discussed the importance of their spouses in terms of being supportive of the decision to coach as well as being supportive during the season. Ned explained that he coached his children on two different teams and his wife was very understanding of his desire to do so. However, several coaches also discussed the role their spouses played in terms of facilitating communication between the parents and the coach as well as amongst the parents on the sidelines. The latter point is particularly salient to this study because, as previously mentioned, if the coaches are busy on the field with the children, then their spouses may prove to be the social facilitators on the sidelines [this will be discussed in more detail in the Discussion section].

One parent volunteer coach, Neil, stood out amongst all the rest in terms of creating and sustaining social connections with the children and parents on his team. Neil served as an assistant coach for several years when his oldest child first started playing soccer. Neil then began leading his own soccer team, and he continued on in that capacity for more than five years. Remarkably, he was able to keep together the same "core group" of roughly 10 children on his team over that time. The social connections Neil described were quite deep because they had been built over a number of years. These experiences included two children on the team whose respective parents went through a divorce during the core group's time together. Neil explained the importance of the team during such trying times, including the willingness of

fellow parents on the team to house other children while the divorcing parents worked through their difficulties. Interestingly, however, Neil classified his friendships with people from this team primarily in relation to the children. For instance, when I asked, “I’m assuming that these people, some of them, would classify as friends?” Neil responded with, “Oh yea! They’re all my kids!” Neil was quite proud of his relationships with the children on his team, saying that they all knew they could come talk to him if they were having difficulty. However, as I will explain later, the perception from other study participants about this core group was not always so positive.

### **It’s Not Just About Soccer**

All of the participants in the study had positive things to say about their time spent volunteer coaching at Urbana Park District (UPD). Interviewees were asked, “What are the best parts about volunteering at UPD?” In response, nearly every participant noted that it was working with children and seeing them improve. For instance, Steve said, “There’s nothing like seeing someone who’s been struggling to get it. And the light goes off.” Many participants discussed similar instances in which children learned, improved, or exhibited some kind of growth on the soccer field as well as off it [the lessons that transcend beyond the soccer field will be discussed later]. Jim described his experience coaching children, saying “even as frustrating as it can be during the weekdays and at practice, it’s rewarding on the weekends when they actually play the game” and you see them put into practice what you have been teaching them. Therefore, despite the frustration, many of the participants in this study described their joy in working with children and seeing the children take what they learn in practice and put it into action.

Several coaches also described how rewarding it was to help children build up their confidence through playing soccer. Julie explained that she had a young girl on her team who was very shy. Julie worked with the young girl to help bring her out of her shell, and by the end of the season the girl had shown significant improvement. Not only were the girl's parents very appreciative, but Julie was also extremely proud because, "That's something that [the young girl] can carry on through her middle school, or her later years. That's something where if she's going to be a shy person, but she has broken out of her shell at least once." Nolan, another volunteer coach, mentioned his own rewarding experience in helping children improve their self-esteem and self-confidence through soccer. He explained that several children on his team were overweight; Nolan worked with these children to help play to their strengths on the soccer field. Nolan reported that by the end of the season these children were doing fantastic on his team, contributing to help form an intimidating set of defenders. Such experiences with an individual child were mentioned by just a few of the participants in the study, but those who did have an experience like this felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

Many participants discussed the importance of being a positive influence to the children on their team. Some, like Uta, discussed this positive influence in terms of being a good role model. Steve discussed his desire for being a positive influence on the children in terms of helping them build character. Steve described his own difficult upbringing and thus the need for emphasizing character not just to his own children, but all of the children on the soccer team. Several interviewees mentioned a similar interest in volunteer coaching that centered not just on their own children, but also helping other people's children. Uta explained that, "I always wanted to teach, um, I don't know. I just like working with kids. We've got three... We always said if we had unlimited time, money, and energy we probably would've had six or more." Saul

discussed volunteer coaching as very rewarding, and not just because he got to work with his kid but for the chance to work with all the children. Similarly, Bev said, “I mean I was doing it more just for my kid. But in the end it was nice to be there for all the kids.” These feelings of enjoying working with other people’s kids are similar to what Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough (2009) described in their study of youth sport coaches.

In addition to the importance of working with all children on the team, many of the participants also described the significance of coaching soccer such that the lessons taught on the field would transcend beyond just soccer. One coach, Neil, explained that he wanted the children on his team to learn something beyond just the sport, but he also wanted them to develop a love for sport that would carry throughout their life. Julie expressed similar sentiments, saying “I’m not as nit-picky on technique. I’m not a perfectionist kind of type. I just want them to have a good time, I want them to learn, but they have no reason to be overwhelmed with technique or rules.” For some other coaches it was a matter of teaching fairly basic social etiquette. For example, Jim mentioned how his expectations quickly changed as he worked with the children, saying “Oh I’m going to teach these kids how to be, you know, on a World Cup soccer team... But you realize that it’s not all about soccer. You have to teach them, “No you can’t say ‘You suck’ to that person.”” In another example, Rex explained that he recognized that it is unlikely any of the children on his team will go on to play professional soccer. However, he added that, “I think there are very valuable things kids can learn about cooperation, teamwork, leadership, following. There’s a lot of life lessons that can come out of that.” Steve, another volunteer coach, discussed similar off-the-field lessons, saying “Yea I may use soccer to do it but it’s all about coaching them how to succeed and be honorable men and women in life.” Therefore, while many of the coaches were interested in teaching their children the core aspects



of soccer, these same coaches were also interested in instructing their young players to become better people outside of soccer.

### **The Most Challenging Aspects**

Participants in the study described a number of different challenges of volunteer coaching at Urbana Park District (UPD). Interestingly, participants interpreted this question in two different ways. First, many participants described challenges and difficulties having to do with fitting coaching into their already busy lives. For instance, Alex mentioned several times the difficulty he had with coaching because of his already substantial work and family demands. He had coached as an assistant for one season and then as a head coach for another, but had to step away from coaching because of the demands at his job. Another volunteer coach, Brad, mentioned that he worked 10 hour days before each of their practices and it was often a challenge getting to practice on time. Julie mentioned a similar challenge of fitting coaching into her schedule, but said that now that she has coached regularly it is easier because she can plan her schedule, in part, around coaching. Lastly, Bev mentioned the significant amount of time she invested in preparing for each practice. Bev was one of the few study participants without a soccer background and thus she said her preparations often consisted of at least two to three hours each week outside of practice time. Thus, one of the main ways that study participants interpreted the question about the worst or most challenging parts about volunteering related to the effort of fitting coaching into their already busy schedules.

The second set of challenges and difficulties discussed by volunteer coaches focused on their interactions in and around the soccer field. Specifically, participants described difficulties in three main areas: dealing with children, parents, and the UPD staff. First, several participants

described the most difficult part of volunteer coaching was dealing with the children. Julie mentioned that working with children can be frustrating, especially as you try to seek the balance where “you don’t scold them. But you also don’t let them get away with everything.” Steve discussed the challenge in dealing with children when you do not know much about their background or their family. For instance, he explained that some children might be dealing with a divorce in the family or simply just a bad day at school. Regardless, such situations, he said, could have a negative impact on a child and thus make it difficult to connect with them and get them to focus on the soccer field. Another volunteer coach, Ivan, made an interesting statement, saying that children were both the best and worst parts of volunteering. Ivan pointed out that he liked having a positive impact on children, and he thought “kids are hilarious!” However, he also described the frustration of dealing with children who wanted to argue all the time or did not want to follow his instructions. Ivan further elaborated, saying the challenging times were especially hard because:

You have to deal with your own kids, that sucks enough. But then you’re with a kid, and you think to yourself, You’re not even my kid! Why am I doing this?! ...You’re sucking the energy out of me! ... It’ll put you in a bad, bad funk. Kids can get you. ... But it’s because I love kids.

Statements such as these were interesting because it reveals the complexity of the feelings that people have about volunteer coaching soccer at UPD. For individuals like Ivan this frustration could make the coaching experience difficult, especially when this frustration carrier over to time outside of practice. Nevertheless, Ivan continued to coach because he enjoyed working with children. Thus, the frustration of dealing with children was a somewhat frequent comment made

by study participants. However, this frustration had not become so great that they considered no longer coaching.

Second, many volunteer coaches also said dealing with parents was one of the most challenging aspects of volunteering at UPD. Jim bluntly stated “Honestly parents are the worst. That’s the worst part about volunteering,” largely because some refused to hear his feedback about their children’s poor behavior on the field. In his experience, these parents had attitudes just as bad as their children. Thus, Jim experienced difficulty communicating with several parents that only made his on the field experience that much more difficult. As Jim put it, “And it sucks! Cause you kind of volunteer your time and you have to deal with parents that want to complain all the time.” Nolan also expressed frustration in dealing with parents because he felt many did not take the soccer program seriously. For instance, he described several situations in which children would miss a soccer practice or game for a sleepover or some other activity. Nolan explained that this made his life difficult in terms of planning lineups and having enough children on hand to field a team. Nolan also felt it was disrespectful to him because he was a volunteer, giving his time and not getting paid, and thus parents should be more diligent in bringing their children to practices and games.

One volunteer coach, Neil, discussed a slightly different set of challenges related to parents. Neil, as discussed above, coached a “core group” of the same children for several years. Neil explained that in one instance he had a parent pull his child from the team because the parent did not agree with the level of playing time for his son. However, a more significant incident Neil experienced had to do with his final season coaching in which 25 children were assigned to his team. He explained that such a number of children was difficult because it was not quite enough for two teams, but made for one team that was too large. UPD originally left it

up to Neil to try to coach this one team, but early on in the season it was decided that the group really need to be split up into two teams. The resulting split fostered anger and frustration with many parents, some of which was directed at Neil. Neil described the situation as a poor decision by UPD that put him in a difficult position of deciding how to proceed. Neil wound up splitting away from UPD with his core group of children, and a few select others, to form a traveling soccer team [The remaining children were formed into one team that then was coached by Rex, another participant in the study].

Relatedly, the third and last difficulty discussed by volunteer coaches was dealing with UPD staff. Neil's frustration with UPD, described just above, was echoed by many different participants in the study. Steve, Ivan, Nolan, and Bev all described how the UPD seemed lazy and uninterested in doing anything other than the status quo. Ivan explained that dealing with the UPD staff was frustrating "Cause it appears they don't give a shit." For Ivan this was especially difficult because he had a lot of parents complain to him about the quality of the soccer program, some of whom assumed he worked for UPD. He explained that he did not work for the park district, but made sure to relay those concerns, as well as his own, on to the UPD staff. However, he believed such feedback was never acted upon because he never saw any changes in the program or with UPD staff themselves. Ivan noted, "Cause they don't want to make it good. They just want to get by and go home." Nolan discussed similar frustrations with UPD staff, saying that it felt as though they simply ran the soccer program to do it and get it over with. This was not the way to run a professional organization, Nolan noted, and he used several examples from neighboring Champaign Park District (CPD) as ways to do things better.

Besides just laziness, study participants expressed frustrations related to the lack of organization in the UPD soccer program. Brad noted that the park district in the neighboring

community, Champaign Park District (CPD), was much more organized than UPD. Ivan lamented the lack of organization at UPD because he had heard several parents express their interest in going over to use CPD programs because they were better organized. Alex, who had never coached before, mentioned that he felt UPD could have done a better job in having all of the paperwork, t-shirts, and other such items organized for each coach ahead of time. None of these things were adequately taken care of before the season and Alex explained that made his life as a volunteer that much more difficult. Several other study participants complained about the lack of updates on the park district's weather hotline. The hotline is supposed to be updated each time there is questionable weather to alert parents and coaches about the cancellation of practices or games. However, multiple volunteer coaches noted that the weather hotline was routinely out of date and thus completely useless. Julie mentioned that when the weather hotline was not updated that she would then get calls from parents asking her if a practice or game would still continue as scheduled. Such situations, just like Alex described above, are especially frustrating because the UPD staff should be completing these tasks as part of their duties, but in failing to do so it makes more work for the people who are volunteering their time. This lack of organization was particularly frustrating to some, including Ivan and Nolan, because UPD staff was being paid to do this work while the coaches were all volunteers. Nolan correctly pointed out that even the referees on game days were being paid, but he felt like as a volunteer coach, he was one of the individuals doing the most work to help make the program run.

An interesting pattern emerged in that the people who were most critical of UPD were the ones who had some kind of tie or connection to the agency. This included several people who currently work for the park district as well as several long-term volunteer coaches. In many ways their critiques made a lot of sense because these volunteer coaches were in a privileged

position to comment on the quality and effectiveness of the UPD youth athletics staff. Almost everyone with an inside knowledge of UPD stated that they had already given at least some, if not all, of their feedback to the UPD athletics staff. Frustratingly, the UPD staff rarely, if ever, utilized the information they were provided in order to improve the program. Steve discussed his frustrations after providing many different ideas and opportunities for improvement that were never implemented. Relatedly, Nolan said he had provided feedback numerous times to UPD staff, and was even told that his ideas were under serious consideration. But then when none of his idea were implemented, he felt like “Why bother?!” Thus, the volunteer coaches who were in a position to help improve UPD were quite frustrated because they felt their feedback was not being taken seriously. As Nolan put it, he wished that UPD would take the initiative to ask him for his feedback. But, he noted, he stopped expecting anything from the UPD athletics staff:

“Now for the [Urbana] Park District thing, I already told you, just don’t count on them for anything. Don’t count on them for any kind of... assume that the only thing they will provide will be the field, on the day, the field, the refs, and the balls. The rest, you have to organize everything. You have to sometimes I would have to check the schedule with the weather, but I would email everybody the morning about that.”

Several other study participants expressed similar frustration with the lack of accountability on the part of UPD. This lack of accountability was especially frustrating because many of these individuals expressed an interest in seeing UPD improve, including ways that would help the full-time UPD athletics staff do their jobs, but the follow through by UPD on such feedback was just not there.

### **Program Improvements Needed**

Despite all of the frustrations voiced by these volunteer coaches, many were still interested in finding ways to see the program improve and succeed. Some of the suggestions focused on things that would help improve the experience for the coach. Some participants, such as Ned, mentioned that an excellent benefit for volunteer coaches would be a fee waiver for the coach's son or daughter. Participants noted that typical fees for their child for one season were about \$30. Receiving a waiver of these fees would not amount to a huge savings for the parent, but it would at least give each coach a little something for his/her efforts. In another example, Steve believed that the park district should offer a training or certification for all coaches. He saw these kinds of credentials as an excellent way to help coaches, especially new coaches, build their confidence in teaching soccer to young children. Neil went a step further and discussed his method of getting parents involved on the field, training them to be assistant coaches, and ultimately helping them transition to lead their own team. Thus, Neil explained, "the absolute best thing UPD could be doing – take your experienced coaches and get them to teach the next group. With the expectation that next group [would] teach on." Steps such as certification and on-the-go training would not only benefit the program, but they could also provide opportunities for greater social benefits as volunteer coaches spend more time in the program.

Other suggestions from participants focused on the overall operation of the program. Nolan was adamant about the importance of doing player assessments. Assessments are when the UPD staff as well as the coaches evaluate each player based on a common set of drills or exercises. Doing assessments allows for a distribution of talent across all teams to ensure competitive balance. Nolan explained that the neighboring Champaign Park District did assessments every two years and that this was a very effective model for redistributing players to

maintain balance as well as to have each kid interact with a wide array of other players and coaches in the program. Nolan noted that UPD used to do assessments, but then the UPD staff got lazy and stopped doing them. He, along with Steve, believed assessments should be reinstituted. The overall point of doing assessments relates to fairness and competitive balance. Both Steve and Nolan commented that it is no fun to lose all the time, and doing things like assessments help ensure that all the teams are relatively well balanced. In terms of the social impacts, having a competitive balance may produce mixed results. On the one hand it may be beneficial because the re-balancing of teams would necessitate a shuffling of players that would expose the children and their parents to more people around the league. On the other hand, having competitively balanced teams could also mean that each game might be hotly contested; if such situations get out of control they could result in a shift too far towards competition.

In addition to assessments, a few participants also described the need for an overhaul of the volunteer coach recruitment process. As it currently stands, the UPD soccer program is constantly looking for volunteers and thus will take almost anyone who expresses interest. However, Steve noted, “they should do more than just accept everyone that says, “I want to coach.”” He said the problem with this strategy is that no one spends the time to figure out if each coach has a philosophy or approach that matches the UPD’s philosophy. According to Steve, the UPD philosophy focuses on learning the basics of the sport of soccer as well as some general team sport lessons such as sportsmanship and teamwork. It is also generally agreed that there are no winners or losers at UPD youth soccer games because they do not keep score. This philosophy was generally agreed upon by most coaches and was reflected in the rulebook that UPD distributes for its youth soccer program. However, Steve noted “They never asked me my philosophy... But no one has ever asked me what my philosophy is. They never checked to



make sure that my philosophy meshes with [the park district's philosophy]." Furthermore, UPD never worked to actively enforce their philosophy. In other words, if a coach is not behaving in a way that is consistent with UPD's philosophy then the UPD athletics staff should talk to the individual and ensure more appropriate behavior. The result of not enforcing their philosophy, Steve explained, is poor quality coaches that oftentimes focus more on winning than individual player development. Thus, the ultimate goals of the park district are subverted because UPD staff has not done a good job of screening coaches nor of enforcing their organization's philosophy.

Besides screening coaches, several participants also discussed their frustration with UPD staff in terms of actual volunteer recruitment efforts. Ivan noted the lack of quality of coaches was, at least in part, due to the staff's inability to effectively recruit new volunteer coaches. This was highly problematic because, as he put it, "If you have no volunteers then you have no program. Volunteers equals program. Whoever runs the volunteers runs the program. So they need someone to run the volunteers. They need someone to really pay attention to the volunteers." Thus, Ivan believed the UPD staff were overlooking or simply neglecting a huge part of their job. He noted that the lack of effort in this area has hurt the overall program, and will continue to be a problem area until UPD has a staff member dedicated to volunteer recruitment.

A final aspect of the program that participants wanted to see improved was the effort by UPD staff to retain volunteer coaches. Complaints about this aspect of the program related to the lack of effort by UPD staff to maintain contact with coaches, conduct periodic check-ins, and show appreciation to the volunteers for giving their time. For instance, Bev, a first-time coach with no previous soccer experience, was extremely frustrated that the UPD staff did not do more

to stay in touch with her during the season. She explained, “I’m doing it for my daughter, that’s why I finished doing it. But if you really want to keep people I feel like they [need to] do more to keep people. Right now I don’t think they’re doing anything.” Thus, she was not only talking about herself but also pointing to the need for UPD staff to stay involved with all coaches. Bev later added that the lack of UPD staff involvement “didn’t stop me for this season. But I’m sure it’s one of the things that’s keeping me from wanting to do it again.” The lack of effort or a poor job by the UPD athletics staff may deter some individuals from coming back to coach again.

Despite their frustration with the UPD staff, several other individuals expressed their intent to return. In terms of their social experience, it is clear that a poor job by the UPD staff makes it that much harder for volunteer coaches to have a good overall experience. If these coaches are worried about basic things like whether or not practice is canceled due to weather, then they are not likely to be interested in committing the time and energy to get to know other people out on the soccer field. Furthermore, a poor job by the UPD staff can also reflect poorly on the volunteer coach. As noted earlier, several parents in the league assumed Ivan worked for UPD because he was well organized and knew what he was doing. These parents sought him out to express their frustration; Ivan had to explain that he understood and shared their frustrations, but he was in fact a volunteer. Therefore, a lack of effort or a poor job by UPD athletics staff may reflect poorly on the league as a whole and may make it so that volunteer coaches must bear the brunt of the criticism.

When asked if they were interested in coaching again, participants gave a variety of answers. Some, like Alex, explained that he would definitely like to do it again, but he acknowledged that there are significant time constraints. He also mentioned that if he were to coach again that it would likely only be at the lower level because he is not comfortable coaching

older children on the finer points of soccer. Bev expressed similar reservations about coaching children beyond the lowest level because she felt she did not possess enough soccer-specific knowledge to coach anything more advanced. Of the three college-aged students, Carl noted that he was not likely to coach again, mostly because of the time commitment. The other two college-age students, Julie and Jim, both expressed an interest in continuing. Julie cited the reward of seeing one girl improve that prompted her to coach again. Jim said that coaching now has better prepared him to coach again in the future, including the desire to coach for his potential children down the road. Other coaches were not so optimistic. Ivan mentioned that he would continue to coach, but one of the major reasons he would do so is because there was a lack of good coaches. Nolan expressed similar frustrations with UPD and the way they run things. He said he would continue to coach because of his youngest daughter, “But I’m not expecting anything to be improved enough so I’m just expecting the same thing, same issues, same problems [with UPD]. But I’ll do it for her. And also for the other kids that are, you know, benefitting.” Thus, these coaches are interested in continuing for the sake of the children, but it is often despite the reservations they have with UPD staff.

### **Core Groups**

As previously discussed, Neil coached a “core group” of children for more than five years. Neil extolled the benefits of keeping this group together, saying that it allowed the children to develop their skills further because they were with a stable group. He believed his group was beneficial for several reasons. First, having a core group of children meant there was a consistent set of expectations that did not have to be re-established at the beginning of each season. Neil believed that setting expectations each season was much easier because most of the

children already knew what they were and were not supposed to do. New children on the team were able to learn these expectations fairly quickly because they could fall in line with the rest of the team. Neil also stated that the children who were part of the core group tended to be the more advanced players on his team and so he was able to pair these children with newer players to help them improve. Beyond just teaching new skills, Neil explained that he also taught his core group of children the proper language to use when working with other players so that their instruction was seen as helpful rather than condescending or critical. Ultimately this factor was important because it allowed the group as a whole to advance further because they did not have to relearn basic rules, expectations, and skills at the start of every new season.

Second, having a core group of children was beneficial because it allowed parents to make deeper connections. As Neil put it:

The first season they all stand there and look at each other. They don't talk unless they already know each other. After they start cheering and yelling [together] and they see each other the next season, well then they know another set of kids. They start taking care of each other.

Neil mentioned that these deeper connections amongst parents led to things like carpooling children to practice. In some instance, he observed, parents would even drive from one side of town to another to pick up children and bring them to practices and games. Furthermore, Neil explained that two separate families on the team went through divorces during the team's time together. He stated that the parents and children from the team played an important role for the respective children as their parents went through a divorce. Thus, keeping together a core group of children was also a matter of continuity with parents and families.

Third, the core group stuck together not just at soccer, but off the field as well. Urbana only has one middle school so while many of these children may have grown up going to different elementary schools, by the time they got to middle school they were all going to the same place. Neil gave the example of one young man on the team who used to hang out with a “bad” crowd of children at school. This young man could now hang out with the core group of children from the soccer team and they could help keep him out of trouble. In addition to the group extending beyond the field, Neil also described how events outside soccer could impact things on the soccer field. For instance, he explained the team’s system in which a kid who was misbehaving at school or not getting good grades would have to sit out some or all of the soccer games that week. Neil believed this system was particularly effective because it meant the children were not just accountable to themselves but also to their fellow players. And according to Neil, the tight bonds formed as a result of keeping the core group together resulted in somewhat regular social gatherings outside of soccer. Neil noted that over the previous summer the group had gotten together on two separate occasions to play paintball. These gatherings were organized through the team e-mail list, and were further facilitated by a parent on the team who ran a facility that hosted paintball games. Thus, the stability and continuity of the core group allowed the children and their parents to develop bonds of friendship that extended beyond the soccer field.

Neil was one of the first people interviewed for this study. As such, the issue of core groups was one that I brought up with subsequent study participants to better understand the range of people’s thoughts on the issue. Several participants had positive reactions to Neil’s core group of children. For instance, Brad and Uta mentioned that their oldest child played on Neil’s team in the latter years of the core group’s time together. Uta enjoyed their time, albeit brief,

with this team because, “I felt like there was more of a community atmosphere because the parents had been so involved.” Thus, even people who were not originally part of the core group were able to join the team and experience a sense of closeness and community. Furthermore, Brad and Uta noted that the connections with many of the parents from that team endured as their other children continued to go through the soccer program. These bonds included seeing and interacting with people on Saturday mornings at the playing field, but also continued connections outside of soccer. As Uta explained,

We still maintain some relationships with the other parents from that team. Even though we [our kids] don’t play soccer with them anymore or anything. So I think, the involvement that Neil encouraged grew into a larger relationship. We Facebook with some of the people now.

Thus, the bonds and connections formed during their son’s time on Neil’s team led to relationships on and off the field. On a similar note, Julie discussed her experience growing up playing with a core group of girls, but in a different community. This team was coached by several of the girls’ dads, and many of them lived in the same neighborhood. Julie expressed her delight with this setup as well as a bit of shock when she first started coaching in Urbana and realized things were different from her home town. In this instance as well as the one’s just discussed, it is clear that having a core group of children and parents together for several years likely leads to an enhanced sense of community. This sense of community, what I have described in terms of social capital, likely takes months or years to develop. But once these bonds begin to form it seems that people are better able, and probably more willing, to maintain these relationships.

While some participants expressed the benefits of keeping together a core group of children, other participants discussed mixed feelings. Saul was one participant who explained that he saw both the positives and negatives of keeping together a core group of children. He described his interest in keeping a group of children together, and it was mentioned by Brad and Uta that they knew that, in the past, Saul had specifically requested certain children to be on his team because they were his son's friends and he had coached them before. Saul said that ultimately it would not matter as much because fewer children sign up at the older age level which means the league usually winds up with just one team anyway (this one team then plays teams from other park district's in the nearby area). Bev had similar thoughts about core groups, saying that she really liked the idea of children playing on teams with other children from their neighborhood. However, she was extremely hesitant to endorse such configurations if it meant such teams would become highly competitive. She did not feel this increased competition was acceptable for UPD, saying "I mean it's neat that they were developing all those skills, but maybe that's more suited for a different program." Such thoughts were echoed by several different participants, noting that the increased skill and competition level of a core team was much more suited for the local club soccer organization, Little Illini Soccer. Additionally, some participants discussed the potential problem of having one highly competitive team in a league in which the other teams are not oriented in the same way. The results, Nolan implied, would be situations like Neil's core group team that "slaughtered" others and made for an extremely uncomfortable situation for the children and parents on the losing teams.

Other participants expressed a much stronger disapproval for the practice of keeping a core group of children together. Nolan was the most strongly opposed participants, saying that such a practice was "unhealthy" for the children. He believed that the purpose of UPD soccer

was to teach children soccer, but that the underlying philosophy was also concerned with mixing children from different backgrounds so that they could interact with a wider group of people. Nolan's preference was that children should be equally distributed amongst the teams (through the use of assessments, as discussed above) and then each group should stay together for two years. Over the course of two years, or four seasons, a group could grow and learn from the coach as well as from each other. However, after that period Nolan felt all the teams should be broken up and redistributed. Anything longer, he said, was more akin to club soccer and thus those players and their families should go play with the local club team, Little Illini Soccer. Another participant, Ned, discussed similar reservations about the practice of keeping together a core group of children. Ned believed it was important for children to be on different teams so that they could interact with and meet new people. He felt this mixing of children was a core part of the UPD program, and he was extremely interested in these opportunities for his children. Ned noted:

We are here for the kids to learn to interact with new people. And every year I've had a lot of my teams my daughter has been on, not many people she knows. And they get a little nervous, "Oh I don't know anyone." But by the end of the season they are close.

Thus, Ned did not see the process of starting over every season as a bad thing. He added that the increased opportunities to interact with children and parents were something that he relished, even mentioning his fond recollections when he looks through all the photos of children he has coached. On a slightly different note, Ned believed that he knows some coaches request specific players for their team (beyond their own child). He thinks this practice is wrong because it ultimately points to a coach who is more interested in winning than the specific development of the children on his/her team. Therefore, keeping a core group of children together may likely



lead to an enhanced sense of community for some, but there are other factors that come into play that make such setups less beneficial for the children on the team as well as the other children and parents in the league who are not affiliated with that team.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

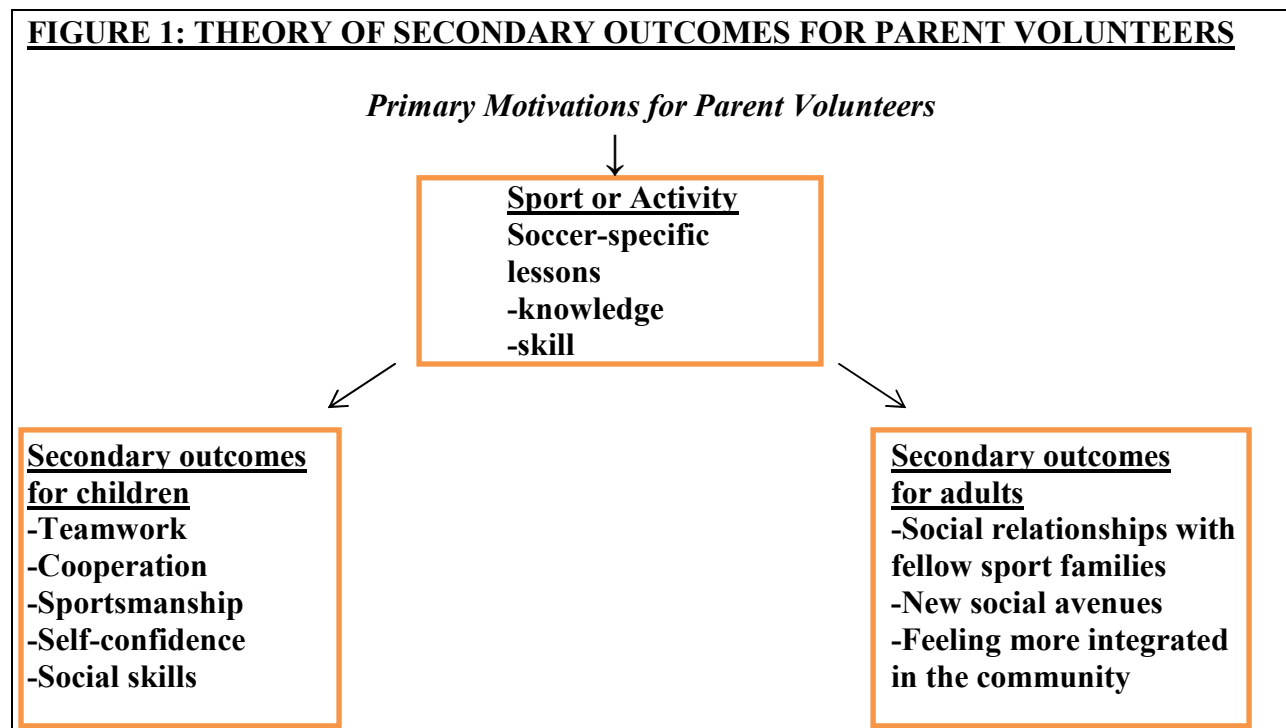
#### **Summary of Findings**

Participants in this study decided to volunteer with Urbana Park District (UPD) youth soccer for different reasons. Most people chose to volunteer in order to help their child, and several expressed a more in-depth philosophy about giving back to the community. The primary motivation and benefit for volunteer coaches was their relationships with the children. Relationships with other adults in the program were also significant, but they tended to be secondary to the focus on the children. One of the main reasons that participants enjoyed working with children was the opportunity to see lessons transfer beyond the sport of soccer. On the other hand, people also described three main challenges associated with volunteering at UPD: working with the children, dealing with parents, and interacting with UPD staff. The challenges in working with UPD were particularly frustrating for some individuals in this study. As a result, many people had recommendations for UPD on ways to improve the soccer program as well as other youth athletics. Lastly, core group teams were discussed including the positive and negative social outcomes of such arrangements.

#### **Integration of Findings into Theory**

This study utilized the grounded theory approach for collecting and analyzing data (Glaser & Strauss, 1990; 1997). Ultimately the goal of grounded theory is to develop theory that is grounded in the data. The findings from this study showed an interesting set of linkages and relationships that point to a larger phenomenon which I call the theory of secondary outcomes

for parent volunteers. This theory hinges on the finding that the primary motivation for parent volunteers was to help their children, but frequently there are also some secondary outcomes, such as social benefits, that are important outcomes that result from this volunteerism. An overview of this theory is provided in Figure 1.



The primary motivation for all of the participants in this study was to help children. The structure or catalyst that brought these people together to work with children was the youth soccer program at Urbana Park District. Participants discussed the importance of teaching children to play the sport of soccer and helping them develop their soccer-specific knowledge. These findings are not surprising given the extensive soccer background of many of the participants. However, many of these same participants also discussed other, broader benefits which they hoped to instill in children through their coaching efforts. These other benefits were ones that transcended soccer, including teamwork, cooperation, sportsmanship, building

confidence, and social skills. It can be argued that these secondary benefits or outcomes are just as important for children, if not more so, than specific lessons about soccer because the secondary benefits apply to many other facets of life.

Coaching youth sports also provides benefits for the parent volunteer coaches themselves. The benefits for parent volunteer coaches are not well covered in the literature and this study sought to address that gap. As stated earlier in the Findings section, the relationships that participants built through soccer were primarily with children. However, parent volunteer coaches also built relationships with fellow adults in the program. For instance, Ned described the fellow “sport families” that he had gotten to know through his children’s involvement in Urbana Park District (UPD) sports. The relationships developed with these other families became significant, even when their children played on opposing teams. In a similar example, Saul explained the unexpected but welcome emergence of “new social avenues” through volunteer coaching. These social connections were not something that Saul anticipated, but he was happy to see that over time they had developed into meaningful friendships. Therefore, the social ties and connections that result from volunteer coaching are often unexpected and overlooked aspects of parent volunteerism in youth sport.

In some instances the secondary outcomes were negative, such as difficult interactions with children, parents, UPD staff, or the core group team. For instance, Ivan explained that sometimes children can be particularly difficult on the soccer field, and “It’ll put you in a bad, bad funk. Kids can get you.” He went on to say that this funk could affect him in his life outside the soccer field, too. Neil’s experience with difficult children was not a common one expressed by study participants, but such difficult interpersonal dealings were mentioned by others in their interactions with parents or UPD staff. Most participants seemed to anticipate at least some of

these difficult interpersonal dealings, and so these social challenges did not come as a total surprise in their overall coaching experience.

### **Review of Research Objectives**

There were two main research objectives in this study. First, to explore the nature and extent of the relationships volunteers built with children, parents, and other coaches in the program. And second, to discuss the positive and negative social impacts associated with working with children, parents, coaches, and league administrators at Urbana Park District (UPD). With regards to the first research question, nearly all of the study participants did not go into coaching as a way to meet people and develop social connections. However, most people developed at least some relationships as a result of their volunteering. Interestingly, the relationships that participants initially described were primarily with children in the program. The reason for this, as many of the volunteer coaches explained, is because they spent the vast majority of their time with the children when they were on the soccer field. Indeed, time spent with the children was mentioned as one of the best aspects of volunteering. Thus, the primary form of relationships built by volunteer soccer coaches was with the children on their team.

Many study participants also described relationships they built with other adults through the UPD soccer program. The nature and extent of these relationships varied, but it was clear that such relationships often took years to develop. This long-term development was likely due to the fact that coaches and parents have limited opportunities to interact with one another during any one season. Thus, over a longer period of time these individuals would have more chances for casual interactions that could then lead to more involved relationships. Two factors played a significant role in facilitating the development of such long-term relationships. First, it helped to

have multiple children go through the soccer program because this meant more opportunities to interact with people from around the league. Furthermore, people with multiple children often coincide with other families with multiple children in the program and thus have even more chances for social interactions. The second factor that played a role in the development of relationships with other adults was the consistency of a long-time coach. Similar to having a long period of time to develop relationships, having a long-time coach provided a consistent presence with which people could relate and build a rapport. Coaches in these positions tended to have significant relationships with the children on their team and, by extension, with their parents.

There were several other important factors in the development of social connections and relationships with other adults. First, several participants described their use of Facebook to stay in touch with other parents they met through soccer. Interestingly, most of these participants noted that they used Facebook to stay in touch with parents who no longer had a child on the same soccer team. Thus, using Facebook to stay in touch with fellow soccer parents was more of a social endeavor rather than a team-related or logistical matter. Second, multiple participants explained the role their wives played facilitating social connections on the sidelines. While many of these volunteer coaches were working with children on the field, their spouses were on the sidelines interacting and building relationships with other parents. In these roles, many of the coach's wives served as both a social connector to bring together parents as well as a conduit to the coach for relaying feedback from the other parents. Chance encounters in public was the third and final factor that played an important role in the development of social connections and relationships with other adults. Several participants described their positive interactions when encountering fellow soccer parents and players at the public library, restaurants, or a school

function. These encounters, although brief, provided opportunities for parents and children to connect outside of soccer.

The second objective of this study was to discuss the positive and negative social impacts associated with working with children, parents, coaches, and league administrators at Urbana Park District (UPD). There were several positive aspects of volunteer coaching at UPD. Many coaches discussed their enjoyment of working with children not just to teach them soccer, but also to teach them lessons about life that transcend beyond the soccer field. Study participants frequently mentioned things like listening, teamwork, and sportsmanship as important lessons they tried to impart on their players. Some participants also noted the feelings of integration in the community as a positive social impact. This integration factor primarily meant getting to know the children and parents in the neighborhood, including seeing fellow neighborhood residents each morning on the way to the elementary school. However, one individual also mentioned the unexpected but pleasant outcome of finding a new social avenue through his interactions with other soccer parents. Therefore, there were several different positive impacts associated with volunteer coaching that helped people not only enjoy their experience on the field, but also get to know people better off the field.

There were also several negative social impacts resulting from time spent volunteer coaching at UPD. As mentioned in the findings section, the three biggest challenges described by participants were frustrations with the children, parents, and UPD staff. These frustrations were often social in nature, such as coaching an unruly child or dealing with an unhappy parent. These negative social situations never seemed to be enough to discourage a coach from coming back for another season, but they were often mentioned as a negative aspect of the volunteer experience. On a slightly different note, several participants mentioned the negative social

impacts associated with a child, and a result his/her parents, not getting on a specific team.

Certain coaches were in high demand in this league, and when these coaches' teams filled up at registration time many parents grew frustrated and angry because their child did not get on the team. The UPD limited the size of each team, but these coaches explained that they bore the brunt of the anger and frustration from these upset parents.

Other negative social impacts related to the formation and continuation of the core group of players and their families. Several study participants who were not affiliated with this core group described the situation as a negative social impact because it increased competition to unacceptable levels and thus ran counter to the park district's mission. The coach of the core group, Neil, described his own negative social impact as a result of his involvement as a volunteer coach. He mentioned that a neighbor with children in the UPD soccer program has not talked to him for several years based on rumors spread by others about his core team. Neil was deeply affected by this silence, and it frustrated him that he could not talk to his neighbor to try to resolve the matter.

One last factor had both positive and negative social impacts. Several participants noted that as a result of volunteer coaching they had a better understanding of the way the park district operates. This was a positive because these individuals appreciated the increased understanding of the tax-supported agency, but it was also a negative because the participants viewed the UPD athletic staff as unmotivated and disorganized. Many of these individuals had shared their frustrations with UPD staff and provided recommendations on ways to improve the program, but felt this information was never seriously considered, let alone acted upon.



## **Theoretical Implications**

A number of theoretical implications can be drawn from this study. As a reminder, this study was guided by three major theories or bodies of literature: youth sport, volunteerism, and social capital. The main focus of the study was to examine the linkages between volunteerism and social capital in a youth sport setting. The first theoretical implication relates to the motivations and benefits of parent volunteer coaches in youth sport. There is a gap in the youth sport and volunteerism literature when it comes to understanding the motivations and benefits for parent volunteer coaches in youth sport. This study described parent coaches who primarily volunteered because of the chance to help children. Almost every parent volunteer in this study described their enjoyment working with children on their soccer team. In addition, the findings of this study are similar to those discussed by Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough (2009) in that the parent coaches in this study enjoyed working not just with their own children but other people's children as well. Thus, the findings from this study highlight the importance and enjoyment of working with children as a primary motivation and benefit for parent volunteer coaches.

One way of understanding the motivations to volunteer is in terms of three incentives: purposive, solidary, and material (Knoke & Prensky, 1984, as seen in Caldwell & Andereck, 1994). Purposive incentives refer to the social interactions and interpersonal relationships that result from volunteerism. Solidary incentives entail contributing to the common good or fulfilling a civic responsibility. Material incentives refer to tangible rewards that oftentimes can be translated into monetary value. The findings from this study showed that some participants felt material incentives might be a nice bonus for their volunteer coaching efforts, but these incentives were not a major factor. Instead, every participant noted that the opportunity to help children, or solidary incentives, was the most important factor. The findings also showed that

purposive incentives were important. These purposive incentives, or social motivations, were frequently unexpected but welcome outcomes resulting from volunteer coaching (I will discuss these social benefits as secondary outcomes in the following pages). Interestingly, other researchers have discussed similar findings when it comes to parent volunteer coach's motivations. Busser and Carruthers (2010) explained that in their study of youth sport volunteer coaches the notion of making a positive impact on players was the most important motive by a wide margin. However, social motives were another motive that scored high for both first-year and returning coaches (Busser & Carruthers). Therefore, social or purposive incentives may not be the primary reason people get involved as volunteer coaches, but they play an important secondary role in terms of motivations and outcomes.

Another approach to understand volunteer motivations is what Cuskelly (2004) called the transition-extension hypothesis. This hypothesis describes situation in which former participants in a sport get involved as volunteers with their respective sport club as a means of staying involved. Transitioning to the role of a volunteer allowed many of the individuals in Cuskelly's study to extend their involvement in the sport beyond their actual playing days. Cuskelly's work primarily focused on community sport organizations (CSOs) in Australia, Great Britain, and Australia, but the findings from this study showed strong evidence for similar behavior in the United States. Many of the study participants had previous soccer experience, including some who had coached soccer before they started coaching at UPD. Their involvement, however, was slightly different from what Cuskelly described because the prime motivation for the coaches in this study who had a soccer background was to help foster an interest in the sport for their children as well as other children on the team. Thus, volunteer coaching was, in part, an opportunity to continue their involvement in the sport of soccer, but most coaches were more

highly motivated by the opportunity to pass on their interest in soccer to their children and other children on the team.

There were a few other factors in the study related to the motivation and benefit of being able to work with children. First, the UPD staff preached a philosophy focusing on skill development and fun rather than competition and winning. Although this philosophy was only loosely enforced, it did mean that no official score was kept for each game. Furthermore, the lack of league organization by the UPD staff meant that coaches had significant autonomy in the way they ran their team. Thus, the UPD philosophy combined with the loose organization of the league meant that the league's atmosphere was not one in danger of becoming highly professionalized. As discussed in the literature review, numerous studies have highlighted the negative consequences of increased professionalization of youth sport, including feelings of exclusion by some coaches as well as a heightened emphasis on winning (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Cuskelly, 2008; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Nichols & Shepherd, 2006). The UPD league did not show signs of professionalization and therefore was a hospitable place for people to work with children in a less stressful and demanding setting.

The second theoretical implication of this study pertains to social capital. Putnam (1993; 1995; 2000) primarily discussed social capital in terms of voluntary associations. Putnam also lamented the changes in society that led to the decline of social capital in the U.S. Specifically, he discussed the changes from a civic generation to Baby Boomers and then Generation X'ers. The changes Putnam discussed have manifested in some ways, but new outlets for social interaction and civic engagement have emerged to fill this void. Indeed, the findings from this study show that such changes may not be as widespread or negative as Putnam initially imagined. Individuals in this study did not necessarily engage in voluntary behavior as a way to

make new social connections. However, such social connections were often an unintended result. The sport of soccer is a great example for discussing some of the changes that have occurred in U.S. society. In the last fifty years, soccer's popularity has grown significantly in the U.S. and, as a result, has given rise to a new setting in which individuals can connect with one another. Thus, social capital may not be present in exactly the same ways as in the past, but new and different opportunities have developed that allow for social connections to be developed.

In addition to generational changes, Putnam (2000) also pointed to advancements in electronic entertainment as a major reason for the decline in social capital. He suggested that electronic mediums such as television and the internet had led to decreased opportunities for social interactions and, as a result, less social capital. However, in this study electronic mediums played a somewhat important role for helping to *connect* people, not separate them. Several participants discussed the use of Facebook to keep in touch with fellow parents from the soccer program, even when their kids were no longer on the same team. Furthermore, almost all of the coaches mentioned the use of email to stay in touch with the parents on their team. Most people stated that they used email to send out information about practices, weather cancellations, and other such updates. One coach, Bev, even put together a weekly electronic newsletter that she sent to parents, and she frequently received short replies thanking her for her time and effort. In this instance and several others participants noted that they did not have email addresses for all of the parents on their team, so email was not a perfect form of communication. However, overall participant's use of Facebook and email was a positive force for maintaining social ties and connections with people they met through the UPD soccer program.

The different kinds of social ties and connections point to another implication for social capital research. Putnam (2000) discussed two different forms of connections: bonding capital,

which refers to the connections and ties made within an existing social network; and bridging capital, which can be understood as the capital generated between individuals in separate groups of people. The vast majority of the findings in this study could be described in terms of bonding capital. Most participants formed ties and connections with people on their team, and only after many seasons did people develop relationships that spanned beyond their team. In some cases, such as with the core group team, the bonding capital was particularly strong among children and parents on a single team. However, the core group seemed to be a somewhat insular group and thus there was probably not much bridging capital built from this team to individuals on other teams. Putnam's ideas of bridging capital and bonding capital are somewhat useful in describing the findings from this study, but these concepts do not fully explain what participants discussed.

Granovetter's (1973) conceptualization of strong and weak social ties is a much better fit for the findings in this study. Granovetter described strong ties as the relationships and connections one has with close friends and family, particularly people you share experiences with on a daily basis and where the connection involves meaningful sharing of information. On the other hand, weak ties refer to more casual relationships with friends (and sometimes family members) that are not necessarily regularly maintained. Before Granovetter outlined these ideas, most researchers only highlighted the importance of strong ties in terms of social networks and community. However, Granovetter was unique in his thinking for pointing to the broader reach of weak ties (hence his coining of the phrase "the strength of weak ties"). The findings from this study showed that most individuals built weak ties with the people they met through the soccer program. Examples of these relationships built on weak ties included semi-regular meetings on the soccer field, occasional get-togethers outside of soccer, and exchanges through email and Facebook. It is not surprising that most participants only built weak ties given the short soccer

season (six weeks in the fall and six weeks in the spring) and that teams only meet two to three times per week. These short seasons, combined with at least some turnover in team members each season, means there were many potential opportunities for people to at least briefly interact with a large pool of individuals. Therefore, Granovetter's conceptualization of weak ties fits nicely with the findings in this study and would be a useful framing for future research on the social connections among volunteers, especially parent volunteers.

Interestingly, the findings from this study showed the development of weak ties could differ depending on one's role on the soccer field. Volunteer coaches primarily built relationships with the children on their team, but their spouses had greater opportunities for building relationships with other parents. Thus, in this study, the spouse who is in the role of the parent (i.e. not the one coaching) is much more likely to make social connections because he/she is in the same role as other parents on the sidelines. Similarly, parents on the sidelines likely have more opportunities to interact with other parents versus the coach who is out on the field with the children. In other words, the parent coach is playing out the role of coach with the children, while the parents on the sideline are in the role of spectators and thus more available to interact with one another. These relationships likely take time to develop, and they certainly are not automatic, but the opportunity for socializations is present. Therefore, future studies of parent volunteers should investigate the development of weak ties among coaches' spouses and parents on the sidelines.

Whereas most study participants described their relationships at UPD soccer in terms of weak ties, the core group coach described the relationships on his team in terms of strong ties. He acknowledged that the first season his core group was together most of the parents did not spend a lot of time getting to know one another. However, after that first season the parents on

the team started to develop relationships that grew stronger over time. Thus, these parents likely started developing relationships that would classify as weak ties, but over time relationships grew into strong ties. These findings are not surprising given that the core group team, for the most part, remained the same for over five years. Thus, the long-term nature of the core group team helped foster strong ties among a small group of parents and children that resulted in close-knit group.

The findings from this study also point to the importance of understanding the dark or negative side of social capital. Researchers have noted that many grand claims have been made in the name of social capital, but oftentimes such claims ignore issues such as exclusivity (Glover, 2004) and organizational power dynamics (Blackshaw & Long, 2005). In this study, the presence of core group teams pointed to a potentially dark or negative side of social capital. The core group team described in this study had the most social ties or connections of any team, but the situation was quite different for individuals not affiliated with the core group. Therefore, this study confirms findings from other studies that highlight the potential for groups with dense social ties and connections to be exclusive and susceptible to internal power dynamics.

### **Management Implications**

There were several management implications as a result of this study. The study was conducted with the cooperation of the athletics staff at Urbana Park District (UPD). One of the major reasons for this collaboration was the recognition on the part of UPD staff that something needed to be done to recruit more, and better quality, volunteer coaches for youth sports. The lack of potential volunteer coaches for UPD mirrors national and international trends that point to declining numbers of parents and others who are willing to volunteer for youth sport

(Cuskelly, 2004). Thus, one of the management outcomes of this study was to better understand local volunteers in order to provide insight to attract more, and better quality, volunteers in the future.

To this end, participants in the study described three things they thought would better prepare and attract potential volunteer coaches: formal training and certification; fee waivers or stipends; and more support from UPD. First, several participants pushed for the adoption of a more formal volunteer training and certification process. Currently, there is an informal coaches meeting at the beginning of each season, but there are no formal certification options for volunteer coaches unless they seek them out on their own. In comparison, the participants noted that the neighboring Champaign Park District (CPD) offers coaching certification to all youth sport coaches. Training and certification may be especially important for coaching soccer because, as several participants noted, they did not grow up playing the sport. As a result, these individuals did not have an extensive background in playing the sport which would have helped them coach more effectively. Therefore, UPD should look to adopt a formal training and certification process for youth sport coaches that helps build their coaching confidence in the sport as well as gives each coach a tangible benefit (e.g. certification).

The second factor that would help attract more and better volunteers is some sort of financial remuneration. As discussed earlier in the Literature Review section, Cnaan et al. (1996) discussed remuneration as one of the four dimensions in their definition of volunteering (the other three were free choice, structure, and intended beneficiaries). In this study, participants explained that a small stipend would be a nice additional benefit for their volunteer service. The stipend would not have to be much, but it would go a long way towards making the volunteer coaches feel appreciated for their time and effort. If a stipend is not a feasible option,



then several participants also brought up the idea of a fee waiver for their child's registration. Fee waivers were utilized in the neighboring Champaign Park District (CPD) and would potentially be an effective tool to help attract and retain volunteer coaches.

The third factor mentioned by participants as a way of attracting more and better volunteers relates to support from UPD. Most participants agreed that the UPD Athletics staff, and the soccer program in particular, were not well organized. However, reactions to this disorganization were mixed. Some participants appreciated the hands-off approach, noting that they did not like the highly regimented nature of the soccer leagues in which they had previously played or coached. Other study participants were more critical of this lack of organization, saying they felt the UPD staff could have done more to help prepare and equip new coaches to be successful. Not surprisingly, the coaches who expressed these frustrations tended to be the ones who were newest to the sport of soccer. Thus, UPD staff should work to be more in tune with the needs and concerns of volunteer coaches who are relatively new to the sport. In addition, some volunteers mentioned the lack of appreciation they felt from the UPD staff. Therefore, UPD staff should not only be more diligent about preparing and equipping coaches, especially new coaches, they also need to be sure they fully recognize and thank the individuals who volunteer.

Practical implications for recruiting, training, and retaining coaches can also be drawn from the theory of secondary outcomes for parent volunteers. The process of recruiting, training, and retaining parent volunteer coaches would likely be much smoother if UPD staff found ways to maximize the positive secondary outcomes. As evidenced by this study, most parent volunteers are so focused on the children having a positive experience that they do not consider the benefits for themselves. Thus, UPD staff should strongly consider recruitment pitches to

potential volunteer coaches that acknowledge the importance of working with children while also highlighting the benefits to the coach. The findings from this study provide preliminary information for UPD staff to use in these recruitment efforts, including the positive social benefits. Further information could be solicited from coaches with a variety of backgrounds and soccer-specific experience to better understand the factors that motivate such individuals to begin and continue to coach.

The theory of secondary outcomes for parent volunteers also relates to volunteering training. Despite varying levels of soccer-specific experience, multiple participants noted the importance for a formal training and certification process for UPD soccer coaches. These training opportunities could be structured so that cohorts of coaches would train together when they first volunteer for the program. The primary goal would be to teach the volunteers about coaching soccer, working with children, and the UPD coaching philosophy. However, a secondary goal would be to encourage socialization among new coaches. These training sessions would provide a common initial experience for individuals to build upon as they begin their volunteering as UPD. As was the case in this study, relationships among coaches and their families may take years to develop. But a common initial training experience would provide the basis for relating to one another both on and off the field.

The theory of secondary outcomes for parent volunteers also pertains to volunteer retention. As previously mentioned, it is important to highlight the secondary outcomes at the outset so that parent volunteers feel their involvement is beneficial for the children as well as for themselves. Emphasizing the secondary outcomes for parent volunteers is important because coaches who enjoy coaching are probably more likely to continue coaching, especially when they have developed social ties and connections with people involved in the program. As some

participants explained, these social ties and connections persisted even when their children were not on the same team. Social ties and connections such as these took years to develop and thus were not as prevalent among coaches who were newer to the program. Nevertheless, there is the potential for positive social outcomes through volunteer coaching if parents are able to continue to coach. Therefore, the secondary outcomes accrued by parent volunteer coaches may oftentimes be unexpected, but they should not be overlooked when it comes to recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers.

There were also several broader practical recommendations that can be made from this study. First, skills in volunteer recruitment, training, and retention are becoming increasingly important for youth sport staff. As several participants explained, volunteers play a crucial role in the ongoing operation of youth sports leagues at the municipal level. Without volunteers, there is no program. Thus, volunteer recruitment must be seen as a vital component of nearly every such job in youth sports. This shift is one not just for the individual and the job description but also for the agencies themselves as municipal recreation agencies must adapt to better provide their core services. Furthermore, the importance of volunteer management also relates to the educational institutions that prepare future youth sport leaders. Volunteer recruitment, training, and retention must be integral parts of the education for people looking to go into the profession of youth sports.

The second broad recommendation from this study was the importance of using volunteer feedback in constructive ways. Many people in this study had suggestions for UPD on ways to improve their youth sports programs. Indeed, several individuals mentioned that they had already shared their feedback with UPD, but their suggestions had not been implemented. Some suggestions may simply be impractical due to limited staff and financial resources. However, the

fact that UPD staff had not acted upon any of their suggestions reflects poorly on the UPD athletics staff as well as UPD as a whole. Other such agencies would be wise to take feedback seriously and find ways to implement at least some of the suggestions in order to improve their overall programs. In many cases municipal parks and recreation agencies have end-of-season evaluations as well as general feedback forms, but feedback should not be limited to just one of these few formal formats. Instead, staff at municipal parks and recreation agencies should be open to feedback at any time. Creating a list to track such feedback would not be difficult, and such a list would provide a reference point to demonstrate what changes have been made. Individuals who are unwilling to hear or solicit such feedback are likely not fulfilling the core duties of their position.

The last broad recommendation from this study relates to the core group teams. Core groups are likely present in many different municipal parks and recreation leagues. There are many benefits to such cohesive teams, not the least of which is having a consistent coach. However, a consistent coach may be tempted to act upon his/her personal philosophy rather than following the agency's philosophy. In this study, the UPD staff was concerned about the effects the core group might have on other people in the league, but due to a lack of volunteers, the staff was unable to change the situation. Core groups in youth sports are certainly an area that is worthy of future research. However, in the meantime many agencies must find the best ways to deal with teams that have the potential for excellent social connections, but may also be exclusive and harmful to the rest of the league.

## **UPD and CBPR**

This study was conducted using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. CBPR is as “a commitment to conducting research that shares power with and engages community partners in the research process and that benefits the communities involved, either through direct intervention or by translating research findings into interventions and policy change” (Israel, et al., 2005, p. 4-5). CBPR fundamentally starts out with a mindset about the ways in which research should be conducted. This mindset in turn gives rise to trust and relationship-building with community members in order to form the foundation for carrying out the research. This study was carried out in partnership with the athletic staff from Urbana Park District (UPD). UPD staff identified a pressing need for more parent coaches, and I was able to work with them to gather information that would be mutually beneficial.

Israel and colleagues organized nine principles of CBPR based on their extensive review of the literature as well as their own research experiences. For the purposes of this study, I focused on four of these principles. The first CBPR principle is that “CBPR acknowledges community as a unity of identity” (Israel et al., 2005, p. 7). A unity of identity is something to which people can belong, or have membership in, which they can identify with the other individuals in the group. These units of identity are created in different ways, but they often share in common at least a few specific values, norms, and/or interests. This principle was relevant to my study because the community of identity consisted of parents and their children who participated in youth soccer at Urbana Park District (UPD). Initially, most of these families did not have significant social ties or connections to one another beyond an interest in a particular sport (e.g. soccer). However, being involved as a volunteer coach provided opportunities for developing social ties with both children and adults. These social ties, both

strong and weak, developed over time and likely formed the foundation for social capital among adults and families in UPD soccer.

The second principle stated that “CBPR builds on strengths and resources within the community” (Israel, et al., 2005, p. 7). This is an important principle because it entails making the best use of what already exists in a community of identity. Some CBPR-type research might be geared towards overhauling an entire system or structure, but more likely the change will come while working in conjunction with people who are already part of an agency, company, or other organization. In the case of youth sports at UPD, the youth soccer program was already fairly successful in terms of parent satisfaction scores on end-of-season evaluations (G. Cales, personal communication, 2010). However, the UPD athletic coordinators noted that the youth soccer program often had to rely on college-aged students as coaches because too few parents volunteered to coach. Although many of these students have a good working knowledge about the sport of soccer, many do not have sufficient experience working with younger children. Indeed, several participants in this study described negative experiences with college-student coaches during their time as parents as well as volunteer coaches. The UPD athletics staff was looking for ways to attract more parent volunteer coaches and this study was, in part, a way to provide information that would aid in these efforts. The findings showed that many participants had specific experience in the sport and that such experience would be the best starting point for recruiting coaches. However, several participants fared quite well as coaches despite no previous soccer experience because they enjoyed working with children. Furthermore, almost all of the participants cited the importance of teaching children lessons that transcended beyond the soccer field. In the future this information will be useful to UPD athletic staff in their efforts to recruit volunteer coaches.

The third principle suggested that “CBPR fosters co-learning and capacity building among all partners” (Israel et al., 2005, p. 8). The authors stated that this should include a “reciprocal exchange of skills, knowledge, and capacity among all partners involved” (p. 8). This exchange is particularly important because different partners bring different sets of skills to the group. This principle is relevant to my research at UPD because of the knowledge sharing and co-learning that took place throughout my involvement with youth sports at UPD. For instance, my initial interactions with the UPD athletics staff on this topic were during adult recreation leagues. However, after a few informal conversations it was clear that a more in-depth conversation was needed and thus we arranged a time for a formal meeting. My understanding of this particular situation, as well as my research ideas on the topic, was heavily informed by listening to stories from the two Athletic Coordinators about their youth sports experiences. In addition, my knowledge of the relevant literature on volunteering in youth sports was useful in further developing ways to approach parents about their involvement as parent volunteers. By working together we have learned from one another and worked toward a mutually beneficial outcome. Ultimately, the result of this study will be my dissertation research as well a series of detailed strategies for the UPD to further involve parents as volunteer in youth sports programs.

The fourth principle outlined by Israel and colleagues (2005) was “CPBR integrates and achieves a balance between knowledge generation and intervention for the mutual benefit of all parties” (p. 8). This principle is partially a response to earlier research approaches that did not necessarily seek to implement or act upon the knowledge that was gained from the research study. The balance between knowledge generation and intervention is important because it highlights the fact that knowledge is generated for scientific purposes as well as for the purpose

of enacting new social changes and policies. In the context of youth soccer at UPD, my goal was to do a research project that provided new insights about the volunteer experience for parents and others that coached. UPD staff were interested in recruiting more and better quality parent volunteer coaches for their youth soccer program. Thus, the information gained from this study will be useful to UPD in their recruitment efforts because they will have a better understanding of the motivations as well as the significant benefits for parent volunteer coaches. Additionally, study participants made numerous suggestions to improve the program that should prove useful to UPD staff. Therefore, the findings from this study will be useful to both me as the researcher as well as the UPD staff in their efforts to recruit, train, and retain volunteer coaches, which is a foundational aspect of CBPR.

### **Rewards and Challenges as a Researcher**

There were many different rewards and challenges for me as a researcher conducting this study. One of the greatest rewards was the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the Urbana Park District (UPD) youth soccer league and all that goes into its operation. Relatedly, I thoroughly enjoyed my time speaking with all of the participants because of the wealth of information they had about coaching, the sport of soccer, working with children, working with parents, and life in general. As the father of a young son, hearing about other people's experiences was both heart-warming and eye-opening as I look to the future. As a researcher, hearing the deep and rich stories that each person had to share helped me gain a better appreciation for the many struggles and rewards associated with being a volunteer coach. I am excited about the opportunity to discuss the findings of the study here as well as the opportunity to continue to build on these ideas in future research.



A few aspects of this study did not turn out quite as I expected. I did not expect study participants to be quite so critical of the UPD staff. From the beginning I assumed there would be at least a few critiques of the way UPD operated, but many participants spent a good portion of time discussing what they saw as the major problems with UPD as well as suggestions for improvement. The fact that people were willing to discuss ways to fix the problems was encouraging, but based on previous experience many of these individuals were skeptical that any changes would be implemented. These critiques were discussed in the most detail by the first several participants I interviewed, and it was often a challenge to try to steer the interview conversation away from just being a critique of the UPD.

Another expected element with this study was the nature and extent of the participant's social relationships. I anticipated there would be at least some social relationships for most people, and indeed this turned out to be mostly true. However, a few participants simply stated that they were not in it to make friends or develop new relationships. Although these views were not totally unexpected, such stances were a little surprising given my own understanding of leisure and its social function. Even more surprising, however, was the presence of a core group of children, parents, and coaches that stuck together for several years. I was only vaguely familiar with this group before I began my study, and after conducting several interviews it was obvious that many people had quite strong opinions about this core group.

The third unexpected factor in this study was the role that wives and spouses played in facilitating social interactions. I did not consider this factor before the start of my study, but after hearing the first few participants describe the important role their wives played it seemed an obvious connection. These coaches discussed how they were busy on the field with the children, but their wives played an important role on the sidelines as a social connector. This role was

slightly different for each family, but it generally meant providing feedback from the parents to the coach as well as facilitating interaction and conversation amongst parents on the sidelines. Additionally, several participants also described the importance of having a supportive spouse when deciding to coach. These individuals stated that they simply could not have coached without the support and consent of their spouse due to the commitment required to coach. Thus, studying family units as a whole would likely provide additional detail to better understanding social interactions as well as the entire experience of volunteer coaching.

After completing the study there were a few things I would have done differently. One of the main things I would have altered was simply my thinking and approach to asking about coaching. Specifically, several participants discussed coaching as a matter of understanding the sport of soccer as well as enjoying working with children. My approach was to focus more on the soccer specific knowledge because that seemed to be a prerequisite for successful coaches. However, this approach tended to overlook the importance of simply enjoying being around and working with children. In the future, I would try to make this distinction clearer for myself as well as for the study participants.

Another significant change I would make is to interview people who never coached. I believe they would have added another element to this study. Relatedly, I would have tried to interview more people who no longer coached. I spoke to a few such people, but it might have been fruitful to discuss with more people their reasons for leaving the program.

### **Study Limitations and Future Research**

There are several limitations of this study. First, the findings from the study are not generalizable to a broad population because they only represent the views of 14 individuals in a

mid-sized Midwestern U.S. city. Further, the participants in this study were soccer coaches and thus their experiences may not directly translate to other youth sports. A few individuals in the study coached other sports like baseball or basketball, and indeed a few of them discussed their experiences related to these other sports. Ultimately, however, this study focused on volunteer coaching experiences for the sport of soccer. Lastly, the sample of people interviewed for this study represented a highly educated group. Urbana, IL is home to a large, public university so it is not surprising that some people in the sample would have multiple degrees. However, the plethora of undergraduate and graduate degrees likely means that the findings from this study do not apply to the general population.

There are numerous areas of opportunity for future research that stem from this study. As previously mentioned, the main focus of the study was to examine the linkages between volunteerism and social capital in a youth sport setting. The findings of this study showed that people do indeed develop social connections as a result of volunteering for youth sport. One additional area to explore would be the importance of coaches' spouses in developing these social ties and bonds. Future studies should focus on the role of coaches' spouses in the development of social connections that might lead to social capital. Furthermore, studying family dynamics might also be fruitful in better understanding people's decision to volunteer. As several participants noted, they would have been unable to volunteer to coach if it had not been for the support of their spouse. Given the lack of volunteers at UPD as well as in many other communities (Cuskely, 2004) it would be beneficial to further explore the factors that influence coaching decisions.

Studying core groups and their effects on the entire league would be another potential area for future research. The core group described in this study was the best example of

volunteerism leading to strong social ties and bonds. However, the core group dynamic was potentially exclusive to other children and parents not on that team. Participants in the study expressed understanding for both sides of the core group issues, including the fact that it fostered a sense of community amongst the members of that team. Thus, it would be worthwhile to follow-up with this core group as well as other such groups in order to better understand what these teams offer to individuals as well as what they mean for the rest of a league. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore clubs sports at the youth level where such core group teams are the norm.

An additional aspect worth studying would be the role of municipal parks and recreation agencies in promoting diversity. One of the main critiques of the core group team was that such frameworks are often highly exclusive based on race and socioeconomic class. In this study, the core group was described as one primarily composed of White children from an affluent neighborhood in Urbana. Future research on this issue could focus on the ways municipal parks and recreation agencies could best structure their leagues. Such efforts might involve assessments, as previously mentioned, but may additionally include sensitivity to other factors such as race and socioeconomic class in the makeup of each team. Different communities would likely need to implement such structures in different ways, but ultimately the goal should be the same: to prevent core group teams from forming in a way that promotes exclusivity and extreme competition at the municipal level.

It would also be interesting to further research the benefits of long-term relationships built through youth sport connections. In this study, the individuals who reported the most social connections tended to be the ones who had been involved with UPD the longest. Thus, it seems that longevity with an organization is important for developing and maintaining social

connections. However, the exact benefits of these connections or relationships are still unclear. In terms of social capital, it would be interesting to talk to several long-time volunteers with such relationships to understand the specific benefits they have realized as a result of developing and maintaining these kinds of social relationships.

Looking beyond the youth sport context, there are other potential avenues for research on the linkages between volunteerism and social capital. Volunteer social networks are one potential avenue for future research. Barnes and Sharpe (2006) discussed volunteer social networks in their study of a Canadian community park, noting that the volunteers did their work not just to benefit the agency but because it benefitted themselves. Such volunteer social networks likely exist in other communities, and the exact conditions for such networks are worth further examination. The findings from this study did not show a social network amongst, volunteers, but the concept is worth exploring in other arenas. For instance, senior citizens and retired people who volunteer at community centers likely have a different experience in their volunteerism than do parents with children in youth soccer.

Lastly, another potentially interesting area of future research relates to volunteer managers and their approaches to recruiting and rejecting volunteers. In this study it became clear that the current volunteer recruitment efforts were insufficient. Several study participants acknowledged this by saying that the job of the UPD Athletics staff should first and foremost be about volunteer recruitment. However, an interesting point also came up in that volunteer recruitment also entails saying no to individuals who are unqualified or do not fit with an agency's philosophy. Based on my discussions with individuals in this study as well as several other people who are volunteer managers, the notion of saying no to potential volunteers is never easy but is sometimes necessary for the betterment of the agency or organization. Thus, it would

be worthwhile to further explore volunteer recruitment strategies as well as the factors that come into play when a potential volunteer is rejected.

### **Conclusion**

The use of volunteers has become an effective, and sometimes necessary, method for carrying out public programs and services. Specifically, public parks and recreation agencies have increasingly had to rely on volunteers in order to carry out basic programs and services. This reliance on volunteers has significantly increased with the recent economic woes befalling the U.S. as well as the rest of the world. This study highlighted the benefits and costs to individuals who chose to volunteer for a public parks and recreation agency in the U.S. The findings demonstrated that there is the potential for positive, rewarding experiences as a volunteer. However, the findings also indicated that there is also the potential for negative experiences as a result of volunteering. Future research should continue to explore the positive and negative effects of volunteering on the individual, especially as they relate to social impacts.

## APPENDIX A

### Fostering Social Capital through Parent Volunteers in Youth Sport

Dr. Kimberly Shinew and Andrew Kerins

#### Information Sheet

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this research is to assess the social ties and sense of community developed among parents and others who volunteer for Urbana Park District. We would like to gather some basic information about you to assist us in our study. Please fill in the information below and return it to the interviewer at the start of your interview.

1. Year born 19\_\_\_\_\_
2. Sex: male / female
3. Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_
4. Marital Status \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g. single, married, divorced, etc.)
5. Number of children \_\_\_\_\_
6. Ages of child(ren) \_\_\_\_\_
7. Highest level of education completed \_\_\_\_\_
8. Occupation \_\_\_\_\_
9. City and state in which you spent the majority of your childhood \_\_\_\_\_
10. Length of residence in the Champaign-Urbana area \_\_\_\_\_
11. Time/seasons spent volunteering at Urbana Park District \_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you engage in other regular, ongoing volunteer efforts? If so, where and how often?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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